

# Managing Fraser Island World Heritage Area

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As the largest sand island in the world, stretching for 122 km along the Queensland coast, Fraser Island undoubtedly lives up to its World Heritage status. Fraser Island is most commonly recognised for its perched freshwater dune lakes, dingo population, high sand dunes and the unique phenomenon of extensive areas of tall rainforest growing on sand.

Fraser Island is an iconic Queensland attraction drawing around half a million tourists a year. The Outstanding Universal Value (OUV) of Fraser Island World Heritage Area includes examples of ongoing biological, hydrological and geomorphological processes including immense sandunes that are part of the longest and most complete age sequence of coastal dune systems in the world, and are still evolving.

Examples of significant on-going ecological and biological processes, such as the vegetation associations and successions represented on the Island which display an unusual level of complexity, occur over very short distances with major changes in floristic and structural composition. Fraser Island is also listed for its superlative natural phenomena and areas of exceptional natural beauty in a diverse and varied landscape that includes more than 40 kilometres of strikingly coloured sand cliffs and over 250 kilometres of clear sandy beaches.

Known as K'gari by the indigenous Butchulla people, the island was first occupied at least 5000 years ago. K'gari holds a special place in Butchulla culture, with the island's lakes being an integral part of their dreaming (NPRSR, 2012).

## **Achieving the Conservation of Fraser Island**

Perhaps the greatest conservation outcome for Fraser Island since receiving World Heritage listing is the properties enhanced conservation status which resulted from the vast majority of the island being converted from a state forest to national park in 1998. Prior to the majority of the property gaining national park status, which did not occur until six years after World Heritage inscription, Fraser Island's rich natural resources were subject to a number of extractive industries that operated on the island for nearly 130 years.





Fraser Island is the largest sand island in the world. Its dunes rise to 240 meters.  
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The island was initially visited by pioneering timber getters in the early 1860s in search of Giant Kauri, Turpentine and Hoop Pine trees. The early logging years saw the building of supporting infrastructure and the beginning of the introduction of foreign plants and animals onto the island. Logging continued to be the major industry on the island until 1991 (FIDO, 2013). This timber extraction was also the beginning of the deterioration of the Butchulla people's traditional way of life (McNiven et al., 2002). The Aboriginal inhabitants were placed in reservations on the island and, by the early 1900s all but a handful had been forcibly removed from their homeland.

In the 1960s, mining exploration had begun, and minerals such as rutile, zircon and monazite were

discovered on the island (Sinclair, 1997). In the early 1970s and amidst significant controversy, sandmining commenced. Following a major national public campaign opposing mining on the island, and involving a number of court cases, all mining leases were relinquished by 1984.

In 1990, a Commission of Inquiry into the Conservation, Management and Use of Fraser Island and the Great Sandy Region was set up by the Queensland Government (Fitzgerald, 1990). The inquiry was a catalyst for stopping logging activities on the island, and also for recommending proceeding with a World Heritage nomination. In 1992, Fraser Island, including a 500 meter perimeter out from low water mark, was inscribed on the World Heritage list.



Although freehold land and small townships are still present on Fraser Island, the island's World Heritage listing under criterion vii (exceptional natural beauty and aesthetic importance), has assisted in limiting inappropriate development. This has helped to ensure that the island continues to remain aesthetically pleasing and an area of exceptional natural beauty.

### **Community involvement**

Community involvement in the management of Fraser Island has been supported by three advisory committees established to provide advice on the identification, preservation, conservation, protection and transmission to future generations of the OUV of the property. The community and scientific advisory

committees were established in the late 1990s and the Indigenous advisory committee, consisting of representatives from eight Butchulla clan groups, was established in 2005.

The committees have been successful in putting the case for additional funding for monitoring and protection of the property's values, assisting to have Indigenous people working as rangers on the property, and identifying potential extensions to the World Heritage boundary. Importantly, committees such as these involve a broad range of stakeholders representing many different community interests and help to give the property's heritage '*a function in the life in the community*' as outlined in the World Heritage Convention (UNESCO, 1972).

The Federal government has assisted the State of Queensland in establishing the committees. There are specific obligations to allow for community involvement in management of World Heritage properties, as stated in the Australian World Heritage Management Principles established in Schedule 5 of the Federal *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Regulations 2000*.

## Challenges

Fraser Island is renowned as a tourism destination and as an iconic, diverse and beautiful island; it is one of the 'must sees' for tourists to south-eastern Queensland.

With around 500,000 visitors a year, ranging from free and independent travellers to organised 'tag along 4wd tours', visitation pressure is one of the challenges for management in terms of maintaining the property's OUV. There are management limits on commercial operator numbers and visitor permits help to manage the volume of visitors on the island during peak times.

Management challenges are well demonstrated at the perched dune freshwater lakes – an integral part of the World Heritage nomination bid due to their number, elevation, beauty, unique wildlife and unusual morphology and hydrology (Arthington et al., 1986). These lakes, particularly Lake McKenzie, the most prominent lake on the island, are extremely popular recreational spots for tourists. Managing the effects from high density visitation such as infilling of lakes, vegetation loss and maintaining water quality, while allowing visitors to experience the natural beauty of the island, is an ongoing challenge.

One of the most high profile and emotive issues for Fraser Island has been dingo management. Believed to be the purest strain of dingo on the east coast of Australia (UNESCO, 2013), it is an icon of the island's wildlife. However attacks on people occurring over the last 13 years, including a tragic fatal attack, have focussed management of the species on minimising human/dingo interactions while trying to maintain a viable healthy dingo population on the island. Management measures include dingo-deterrent fencing, fines for visitors and residents who directly or indirectly feed dingoes, and extensive education campaigns to protect people and to help the dingoes retain a natural way of life (QPWS, 2011). However the challenge for managers remains to strike a balance between enabling tourists to see the iconic species, and keeping any interactions as natural and safe as possible.

The island also faces environmental issues similar to other protected areas such as threats from introduced species, prominent amongst which are feral cats, cane

toads and lantana. Potential impacts from climate change and sea level rise have been identified as major long-term issues. Further research into climate change impacts on the island's lakes, dunes and biodiversity is needed (DEWHA, 2009) to be able to anticipate and plan for climatic events such as increased storm activity and sea level rise.

## References

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### Links

[www.whc.unesco.org/en/list/630](http://www.whc.unesco.org/en/list/630)

[www.nprsr.qld.gov.au/parks/fraser/](http://www.nprsr.qld.gov.au/parks/fraser/)

[www.environment.gov.au/heritage/places/world/fraser/index.html](http://www.environment.gov.au/heritage/places/world/fraser/index.html)

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### Biography

Angie Stringer is the Principal Project Officer of the World Heritage Unit in the Queensland Department of Environment and Heritage Protection. After graduating in 2005 with a degree in Environmental Science and Management, Angie has worked for a range of environmental organisations in Australia and Europe. Angie's current role involves overseeing seven community, scientific and indigenous World Heritage advisory committees and the strategic planning and policies in relation to establishing, administering and managing three of Queensland's five World Heritage properties, which are all listed for their natural values.

Fraser Island's pure dingoes are valued but create challenges for management.  
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