

THE CASE AGAINST FREE RANGE BEACH CAMPING

A FIDO BACKGROUND PAPER

Some people assert that free range camping has been a "traditional use" along the east coast of Fraser Island and therefore should continue unchecked. FIDO argues that free-range camping along Fraser Island's eastern beach, especially at current levels, is a relatively recent phenomenon. FIDO also makes a case that free-range camping at its present level is unsustainable and urgently needs to be reviewed.

In considering the future of Fraser Island's free range camping the following factors should be borne in mind:

1. Prior to the advent of Gordon Elmer's ferry service to Fraser Island in 1969, there was virtually no camping occurring anywhere on Fraser Island except for forestry and timber workers when working remote from their barracks.
2. Free range camping which only got under way during the 1970's was sustainable because the intensity of use was light and the number of camper nights relatively low.
3. Free-range camping was the virtually the only option for most visitors until the late 1970's due to the lack of built accommodation and resorts, formal serviced camping grounds with amenities (the first serviced camp-ground was not established at Dundubara until about 1974) and because the logistics of visiting Fraser Island justified a number of days per visit.

FIDO began running camping safaris in 1971 and we have camped in over 100 locations around the island. We know the wonderful experience which it offers but we reluctantly concede that what was sustainable with a low level of usage in the past is no longer sustainable.

4. The current level of free range camping is not "traditional". The level of camping has been unsustainable for the last two decades but there has been a political reluctance to curb what is deemed to be a traditional usage.
5. Quite apart from site impacts which are detailed below, camping has other environmental impacts not apparent on the ground such as the demands for resources required to cater for camping versus the resources required to provide hard accommodation. The comparison of the

resources involved in each form of recreation on Fraser Island needs to span a long period (say 20 years) to allow the initial inputs in built accommodation to be fairly weighed up.

A HISTORY OF CAMPING ON FRASER ISLAND

In the 1970's usage of any site was relatively infrequent. Camp sites used by one group were unlikely to be used again for several months, sometimes years and they had time to heal the impact of the camps. In the 1970's camping was less sophisticated. Most tents didn't have floors and therefore the grass was not killed if a tent remained on the site for even two weeks. There was plenty of firewood available just from the driftwood on the beach and it wasn't necessary to comb the foredunes and strip the vegetation to feed camp-fires.

It was during the 1980's that FIDO became alarmed at the level of camping pressure. There are a finite number of suitable campsites along the east coast. As visitors increased, these sites were in such demand that as soon as one group of campers moved out another group moved in. There was no time for the grass to recover, the human wastes left behind to degrade and for the vehicle access tracks to recover. It was obvious that casuarinas near all popular camping sites were being stripped of their smaller branches. Most of the casuarinas behind Middle Rocks had been cut down for firewood. MOONBI recorded FIDO's increasing concern at the impact of free range camping at that time.

In 1991 as the Great Sandy Region Management Plan was being developed, FIDO sought to have an environmental impact study done to examine the impacts of camping. The DEH (now the Environmental Protection Agency) agreed to incorporate it with a study on the environmental impact of roads. FIDO believes that neither study was adequate.

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As soon as the first formal off-beach campground was established at Dundubara, campers quickly relocated their preferred camping sites. Increasingly they wanted to be out of the wind and relished the shelter from the strong south-easterly winds which the new campgrounds afforded. These winds wrecked many beach front camps, frequently forced premature evacuations and made such exposure unpleasant.

Free range camping is now in greatest demand by backpackers who don't want to be constrained by regulations. These are the same people responsible for causing the greatest adverse impacts from camping.

1. The impact of fire rings:

The impact of fire-rings occurs in four ways:

- a) there is the direct impact on the ground itself where the ground is sterilised as a result of the heat. All the hyphae in the soil are not only killed but appear to take decades before they can recolonise areas subjected to open fires.
- b) There is a major issue of public safety. Environmental Protection Agency officers have estimated that almost one medical evacuation call per month is to deal with people who have suffered severe burns and most if not all of these occur from the campfires of beach campers.
- c) The cost of supplying firewood is a major drain on the budget for managing Fraser Island and is diverting resources from other more critical aspects of recreation management on Fraser Island. It has been estimated that most of the \$600,000 spent supplying firewood for campers is consumed at beach campsites.

2. The impact on foredune vegetation

The impact on foredune vegetation arises from :

- a) The impact on the site through vegetation clearance to clear and level the tent site and sometimes for drainage.

- b) The impact of establishing vehicular access to the sites.
- c) The establishment of ancillary functions including establishing toilet and ablution sites and the tracks between them.
- d) It is notable that many sand blows originated from vehicle tracks through the foredunes and from pedestrian tracks climbing foredunes. Many such existing scars can be currently identified on Fraser Island despite in many areas the size of sand blows is retreating.

3. The impact on fauna

Pied Oystercatchers: The population of Pied Oystercatchers south of Ngkala Rocks has plummeted since the 1970s in roughly inverse proportion to the number of visitors to Fraser Island.

The numbers have dropped from approximately 500 which is based on recollections of the 1970's to fewer than 20 currently in this section of beach. While the some of the reduction in the numbers of Pied Oystercatchers can be attributed to being run over by motor vehicles, the largest impact has come through the lack of recruitment of chicks.

Oystercatchers nest in the foredunes and the constant disturbance of their nesting sites has stopped the successful recruitment to the population of new chicks. This is probably the greatest contributor to the plummeting population.

Red-capped Plovers: The story of Red-capped Plovers (dotterels) is very similar to that of the Pied Oystercatchers. The only difference is that the reduction in Red-capped Plover population numbers is probably much greater than that of Pied Oystercatchers.

4. The risks to public health

The risk to human health arises from the indiscriminate and unchartered disposal of human waste. There are no rules and no conventions covering the disposal of faecal material in any of the free-range camps. Most opt for pit toilets but there are no

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regulation depths and no rules for marking sites used where such pit toilets have been so that someone may subsequently establish their food preparation areas on this very site. This has already happened on Fraser Island. While the Environmental Protection Agency has reduced the risk of pollution by *E. coli* and *Giardia* by banning camping close to all streams, the risk of polluting the groundwater by the indiscriminate unregulated faecal disposal remains high.

5. Introduced Pathogens

Some of New Zealand's strictest quarantine measures are directed at preventing pathogens being introduced. This is hazard to which Australian park managers seem oblivious. It is a major potential camping impact.

OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

Budgets: There considerable costs to the island budget to provide firewood for the free range campers along the foredunes. Evidence suggests that this group consumes a disproportionate amount of the firewood consumed on the island which has been estimated to be as high as \$600,000 per year.

Control: As long as free range camping is allowed it isn't possible to control the number of visitors to Fraser Island at any one time. The greatest impacts from free range camping occur during the busiest periods on Fraser Island specifically Easter and other school holiday periods. It is when staff are most stretched.

FIDO wants to see more serviced campgrounds such as Dundubara and Cathedral Beach established along the eastern side of Fraser Island. There appears to be strong opposition within the Environmental Protection Agency to establishing any more campgrounds on Fraser Island. FIDO is not committed to seeing such camp-grounds being run or managed by the QPWS as long as the new campgrounds are established well back from the beach and are well serviced.