

A History of Aborigines of Fraser Island

Aborigines have occupied all of Australia, including what is now Fraser Island, for more than 50,000 years. Since Fraser Island became an island with rising sea levels over 6,000 years ago, it has been a very productive territory and home to thousands at a time. Since the 1850s, following European settlement of the adjacent mainland, the history has been tragically affected by massacres, introduced diseases and drugs and loss of culture. Everyone needs to appreciate the impact on the world's oldest continuous culture.

Scientists have established that Aborigines occupied Australia at least 50,000 years ago. Occupation of Fraser Island would have occurred from the very earliest times because the Great Sandy Region has always been adjacent to the coast.

Sea Levels Affected Aboriginal Territories

Until 10,000 years before present (BP) Fraser Island was a part of the mainland. The coastline was then at the very edge of the continental shelf some 25 kilometres east of the present eastern beach. All of Hervey Bay was dry land. The Woody Island syncline deflected the Mary River, forcing it to flow south east down what is now the Great Sandy Strait. The Mary River and its tributaries carved deep valleys into the landscape.

About 10,000 BP the last Ice Age began to wane, causing the sea levels, estimated to have been about 120 metres lower than present, to start to slowly rise. The sea drowned much of the territory of coastal Aboriginal people just as it drowned Atlantis.

Sea levels rose at a rate less than that which it is anticipated will be induced by the current climate change. As the coastline retreated, so the Aborigines followed it back. Groups such as the Ngulungbara, who were forced back to Sandy Cape, would have seen about ninety percent of their territory (including Breaksea Spit) submerged. As the sea levels rose, the velocity of the Mary River and its tributaries slowed down causing rapid sedimentation build up in their valleys, thus creating wide floodplains.

At the time of first contact with Europeans three Aboriginal groups occupied different parts of Fraser Island. The Ngulungbara occupied the northern end of Fraser Island, the Badjala (or Butchalla, Batjala, Badtala) occupied the central part of Fraser Island and the adjacent mainland on the opposite side of Great Sandy Strait, and the Dulingbara spread across southern Fraser Island and on to Northern Cooloola. Watson said they all spoke the same language which was a variant of Kabi-Kabi.

There were great seasonal migrations by the Aborigines between the island and the mainland. Fraser Island was more densely populated during the winter months when fish, particularly the sea mullet, were most plentiful. With the change of seasons, the summer territories on the mainland were reoccupied. An estimated Aboriginal population of 2,000-3,000 used Fraser Island during the mullet season. Bark canoes were used to cross Great Sandy Strait. Most canoes were made of a single sheet of bark which was sealed at each end with wax and resin.

The rising sea levels submerged many former occupation sites and stream side sites were silted over. More than 200 shell middens have been recorded on the east coast of Fraser Island. All are less than 5,000 years old. They are composed almost exclusively of eugaries (*Plebidonax deltooides*). Many archaeological sites along the west coast of Fraser Island have also been recorded. Middens along the sheltered shores include mainly oyster shells (*Ostreidae sp.*), whelks (*Pyrazus ebeninus*) and a variety of crustacea. Such marine food sources would not have previously existed in these vicinities.

First European Contacts

There is evidence that Europeans may have made contact with Fraser Island Aborigines more than 500 years ago. Lead, identified as having come from the Iberian Peninsula (Spain), was found in an old buried shore line near Hook Point on Fraser Island, amongst pumice released in about 1500. It may have come from the Christado de Mendonca 1521-22 expedition. His three Portuguese caravelles set off from Malacca (Sumatra), which was then Portuguese territory, to explore what was then nominally Spanish territory in what is now Eastern Australia. Records of Portuguese exploration were lost in the great Lisbon fires of 1755, but maps of Portuguese origin showing Fraser Island as an island survived in Britain and France.

Two clay pipes discovered in middens near Indian Head were of the type used by 17th century Dutch navigators for trading. These suggest some contact between Dutch sailors and Aborigines in this period, although there is no direct evidence that the contact occurred on Fraser Island as the pipes could have been traded.

In 1770 Captain Cook was the first recorded European to sight Fraser Island. Passing northward at a distance of five miles offshore through his telescope Cook "*saw several people upon the shore*" on a headland (Indian Head). A number of Aborigines had assembled on what they knew as *Takky wooroo* for a better view of the "Endeavour". Since at that stage Europeans regarded all "savages" as "Indians", Cook forthwith named the locality Indian Head.

In 1799 Matthew Flinders noted of his journey up the east coast of Fraser Island: "*... Nothing can be imagined more barren than this peninsula, but the smoke which arose in many parts corroborated (estimates of a 'more numerous population of Indians than is usual to the Southward') and bespoke that fresh water was not scarce in this Sandy Country: Our course at night was directed by the fires on shore...*"

During his second visit in 1802 Flinders landed near Sandy Cape with Port Jackson Aboriginal, Bongoree. This is the first recorded interaction between Aborigines and Europeans. Flinders recorded of his meeting: "*These people go entirely naked, and otherwise much resemble the inhabitants of Port Jackson in personal appearance, but they were much more fleshy, perhaps from being able to obtain a better supply of food with scoop nets which are now known on the southern parts of the coast.*"

Following the establishment of the Moreton Bay Penal Settlement in 1824, many convicts escaped and lived with Aborigines in the Great Sandy Region. David Bracefell escaped three times and each time on returning he was so brutally punished that he absconded again. He also became a "bunda" named "Wandi", meaning "The Great Talker". He spent a year living on Fraser Island and later reported that 2,000 to 3,000 had assembled on the Ocean Beach near Indian Head during the mullet season.

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Impact following the Settlement of the Wide Bay District

Fraser Island Aborigines gained international notoriety through the stories of Eliza Fraser who survived the ship wreck “Stirling Castle” in 1836 with some others. Survivors were fed by the Aborigines and assisted back towards Brisbane and civilization. Eliza told stories of Aboriginal cruelty, savagery and brutality. She made much money by such tales but, although the truth of her stories has been refuted by many, they had the effect of creating a paranoia of Aborigines amongst the white settlers. One of Eliza Fraser’s legacies was that there would be many massacres of the very people who had helped her.

In 1842 Colonial authorities decided to close the convict settlement in Brisbane and open up what is now Queensland for free settlement. This led Andrew Petrie and others to undertake an exploration of the Wide Bay area. They travelled through Great Sandy Strait, discovered the enormous stands of timber on Fraser Island (*Kgari*) and travelled up the Mary River (*Moona-boola*). This expedition was followed almost immediately by selection of grazing holdings at Tiaro and soon afterwards the establishment of Maryborough, which rapidly grew to become a port, administrative centre, a base for Queensland’s infamous Native Police and major centre in Queensland settlement.

Soon after the establishment of Maryborough, Great Sandy Strait became an international shipping lane. Sailing vessels crossed the Wide Bay Bar and hauled into the lee of Fraser Island to take on water at Waterspout Creek (South White Cliffs) rather than sail around Breaksea Spit (*Thorvour*). During this period sailors caused many Aborigines to become addicted to opium and also introduced many pernicious diseases, including venereal diseases. Maritime traffic increased dramatically following the discovery of gold in Gympie in 1867. So many people rushed to the goldfield that a Customs House was established in Maryborough and a Quarantine Station at North White Cliffs (*Ballargan*).

Massacres of Aborigines were occurring quite openly and regularly in and around Fraser Island and Maryborough. In most cases “white volunteers” were assisted or led by the murderous Maryborough based Native Police in these sorties.

Many massacres of Aborigines which resulted from a number of confrontations have been documented in a paper by Raymond Evans and Jan Walker (*Occasional Papers in Anthropology No 8 University of Queensland, 1977*). They noted: “*Following these engagements, the Aborigines withdrew to Fraser Island which, according to the whites, they seemed to be using as a convenient natural fortress, for the avoidance of European reprisal raids.*” This led to considerable planning by white settlers to invade Fraser Island and remove “*35 named Aborigines accused by European settlers of ‘murder and felony’*”.

On Christmas Eve 1851 Commandant Walker, his officers and 24 of his infamous Native Police, supported by some local mounted squatters and sailors sworn in as “special constables”, set out to arrest some Aborigines for which there were warrants. They spent eight days on Fraser Island carrying out what was euphemistically described as “examinations” of Aborigines. Subsequent reports indicate that this was a pretence for a series of massacres which occurred between Christmas Eve and 3 January. Aboriginal oral history reports the biggest massacre was at Indian Head. It may have been seen as a little “silly season” sport for the squatters or a little hunting expedition over the Christmas holiday season. Evans and Walker note that the

official sketchy report strains credulity because the commandant let the Native Police out alone “*to pursue hostile blacks*” simply because he was too footsore to accompany them. The “Moreton Bay Courier” subsequently described this as a “*jaunt*” covered with “*extraordinary secrecy*” and that “*rumours are afloat that natives were driven in to the sea, and there kept as long as daylight or life lasted...*”

There were further tragic incursions into the depleted and demoralized Fraser Island Aboriginal population. In 1857 Europeans grabbed two young albino Aboriginal girls whom they claimed were white girls who had survived the wreck of the “*Seabelle*”. However, they could not speak English and they had no experience of European culture. They were sent to Sydney and confined to institutions where they died within a short time.

In 1860 the whole of Fraser Island was gazetted as an Aboriginal Reserve but this was soon rescinded in 1863 and shrunk to include only the central section of the island after commercial timber-getting began. When timber getters wanted to log this Reserve in 1905, almost all of the remaining Aborigines were removed from the island.

In 1870 the Sandy Cape light station was erected. There was a significant resident population living near the station when Miss Serena Lovell was teaching there in 1891. In 1872 Rev Fuller established a mission at Ballargan but this was closed down within two years so the government could convert the Mission site to a Quarantine station for ships bringing miners to the goldfield. With the gold rush ended by 1897 the Government briefly revived Ballargan.

On Good Friday 1897 Aborigines drove off a party of Maryborough excursionists who claimed that the beach had been “*a favourite resort for pleasure parties for over twenty years*” and a popular “*watering place since before Queensland got separation*”. A public protest meeting in Maryborough drew 300 to 400 people. Within months, parochial pressure caused the mission to be shifted to a less desirable site at Bogimbah Creek.

At Bogimbah Creek Settlement Aborigines lived in conditions comparable with the Jewish concentration camps of World War II. Over a hundred died of malnutrition, dysentery, syphilis, influenza and tuberculosis. Anglican missionaries took over the Mestons’ State control in February 1900 but in 1904 they abandoned the Bogimbah Creek mission. Rather than release remaining inmates, 117 were tricked and taken to Yarrabah near Cairns. Others were sent to Woodford and then to Cherbourg. Out of more than 2,000 Fraser Island Aborigines fifty years earlier, only a handful escaped. This tragedy prompted one Maryborough resident of the time to write an “*enraged memorial*”. “*Isn’t this one of the blackest pages in the history of the British Empire?*”

A Fraser Island Defenders Organization Educational Backgrounder - No. 13
July, 2003