

Impacts and Influences of Patterns of Recreation

While FIDO believes that there is a disproportionate amount of resources devoted towards recreation management rather than natural resource management (as demonstrated on Fraser Island expenditure ratio is *recreation management : natural resource management = 9 : 1*). FIDO believes that it is important to change the patterns of recreation so that a much better share of the budget and management effort can be devoted to protecting the island's natural resources.

Recreation can take a multiplicity of forms but there are some forms of recreation such as golf and other sports that are inappropriate for a pristine natural World Heritage site such as Fraser Island. Such recreation can occur in modified environments elsewhere. Some of the recreation that occurs on Fraser Island include walking, 4WD driving, camping, fishing and swimming.

Because the patterns of recreation influence the pressure on particular parts of Fraser Island it is important to understand firstly, what shapes them, and then what impacts result and finally, how to make changes in the recreation patterns.

The patterns of recreation on Fraser Island are determined by a multiplicity of factors including:

1. Reputation and perception of potential destinations;
2. Established patterns;
3. Advertising;
4. Accessibility;
5. Private/commercial interests;
6. Existing infrastructure; and
7. Regulation.

1. Reputation:

For those who have not been to any site on Fraser Island, three factors above all others help create the reputation that leads to them being compelled to visit particular sites and to avoid or shun others:

- a. Word of mouth;
- b. Advertising; and
- c. Photographs, films and reviews:

In short people make a judgement of the places they think they should see before they even get to Fraser Island. A study by Dr Wade Hadwen showed that Lake McKenzie was at the top of the agendas for many.

The initial impetus for Fraser Island tourism was the public attention drawn to it during the sandmining controversies of the 1970s. Prior to 1971, there were estimated to be only about 5,000 visitors to Fraser Island annually. In 1971 that doubled. It continued to double every year for the next few years before slowing down a little but still growing exponentially based on its ever enlarging reputation. Annual visitation reached its present levels of about 350,000 in the late 1990s. It then plateaued

2. Established patterns:

There is little doubt that there is a huge "follow the leader" mentality involved in the patterns of recreation. Because of this element, tourist traffic crowds better known sites and ignores sites people haven't heard of. Thus everyone wants to go to Lake McKenzie because they have heard of it from others before they even decided to visit Fraser Island.

It is this blind "follow the leader" mentality that is so exploited by commercial interests and the result means that well-known places such Lake McKenzie will come under

ever increasing visitor pressure unless something is done to change the patterns.

Honey pots: National Park managers concerned about preserving the natural resources overall, sometimes work on a honey-pot strategy of encouraging a few places to become a focus for visitation (i.e. become "honey-pots") rather than having visitation spread far and wide throughout their parks. Thus the "honey-pots" are sacrificed by "hardening" and other means to make visitation sustainable in order to preserve the natural integrity of other areas where the natural resources may be vulnerable to disturbance that visitation inevitably brings. This strategy is quite valid provided that it is fully transparent and part of a deliberate and not just accidental management strategy. However on Fraser Island the honey-pots are incredibly vulnerable. Queensland's perched dune lakes are unique in the world and critical to the World Heritage values and yet Fraser Island's lakes have been allowed to become honey-pots.

3. Advertising

Advertising diverts people's demands., For example, commercial promotion of self-drive 4WD tours to the backpacker market has resulted in people cramming into troopies and seeing little of Fraser Island and remaining unaware of the option of a Great Walk experience. Likewise advertising lures people to resorts and commercially available accommodation away from the camping experience or even to softer camping options.

4. Accessibility

Queensland seems to have fallen behind agencies of other states in regulating visitor traffic to particular sites and has used (very awkwardly) only the very blunt instrument of attempting to regulate commercial visitation to any particular site without any attempt to managed free and independent travelers.

Accessibility is determined by proximity, management policies, and modes of transport. These three factors can be better appreciated by considering the visitation to some of Fraser Island's lakes. There is little doubt that if there was a road to Fraser Island's Freshwater Lakes, there would be a procession of visitors there. Similarly if Lake Bowarrady didn't involve a four-hour walk just to reach it, it would attract tens of thousands of visitors instead of fewer than 1,000 visitors a year. What is interesting is that Lake Bowarrady once had many more visitors before it was closed to vehicular access. Still, these lakes are further from the main settlements and lakes that are closer have an added appeal. Visitors could once drive right up to Lake Coomboo. Now although Lake Coomboo is only three kilometres from the Northern Road the fact that people have to walk there dissuades most from wanting to see it.

This 2010 FIDO Backgrounder is intended to provide some perspectives on the nature of visitation to Fraser Island, some impacts and how it might be influenced.

5. Private / Commercial Interests

Patterns of recreation quickly become distorted and shaped by commercial interests although these changes need not necessarily be negative. Encouraging people to township accommodation may reduce some impacts of camping.

Commercial interests though tend to want access to the premier recreation sites and to capitalize on the established reputations of natural sites rather than employing marketing strategies that would increase public interest in alternative sites. This is probably best demonstrated by tour operators from the Sunshine Coast who by-pass Cooloola which has many features the equal of Fraser Island just to capitalize on the reputation of Fraser Island.

Cooloola has similar attractions to Fraser Island. Its coloured sand cliffs and the Double Island Point headland may indeed be more spectacular than Fraser Island's and Lake Poona and the rainforest are incredibly interesting and attractive and the wildflower displays can be more dazzling. There is a rainforest creek that rivals Central Station but tour operators charge clients more and make them sit in buses for hours longer to take them past all of these features just to capitalize on the reputation of Fraser Island. FIDO strongly believes that Sunshine Coast day-trippers would have a cheaper, richer and more relaxed experience if tour operators were to take them to explore Cooloola instead of rushing right past it.

Focus on "hot-spots" Similarly, on Fraser Island all tour operators prefer to be going to the best known sites rather than developing marketing strategies to draw people to other features less well known. As a result the demand for access to Lake McKenzie just keeps snow-balling whereas there are alternatives that operators are unwilling to explore.

There can be little doubt that private developments have at least as much influence in shaping the patterns of recreation as tradition. This can be demonstrated by the focus of recreation on the Kingfisher Resort and the other Fraser Island resorts all of which have appeared within the last half century..

Kingfisher Resort: This resort was built only in 1990-91. Prior to that a negligible amount of Fraser Island recreation was based beside Great Sandy Strait. Yet in less than two decades this commercial enterprise is responsible for handling hundreds of thousands of visitors annually who now use its marine terminal, accommodation or tours emanating from there.

Orchid Beach: Similarly the recreation in the northern part of the island is the result of Orchid Beach developments over the past four decades. Prior to 1963 Orchid Beach didn't exist and it was almost impossible for any vehicles to travel north of Middle Rocks. However, once a resort was established there, a road was constructed without any permit through a beauty spot to allow access. Then when a subdivision was located there, the recreation demand for the area grew rapidly. Orchid Beach was also promoted by Toyota as a ploy to market its products through a Fishing Expo. In short the patterns of recreation seem to be more a product of private investments and commercial promotion than any other single factor. Thus commercial considerations resulted in much more visitation and impacts on the northern end of the island and the demand for more infrastructure to satisfy a growing population that didn't exist 50 years ago.

6. Infrastructure

Infrastructure begets more recreation and draws people to particular sites. This creates the problem of trying to keep up when the recreational use of a site has outstripped the existing infrastructure, as is most demonstrable at Fraser Island's most frequently visited sites such as Lake McKenzie, Indian Head and Eli Creek.

Picnic facilities. There is little doubt that the provision of toilets and picnic facilities at a site will encourage and attract more people to stop at (or stay longer) at a particular site. Thus this simple measure has resulted in a varied pattern of recreation. Likewise the removal of parking facilities or creating "No Stopping" zones will prevent recreation in some areas. For example, Lawn Hill Gorge in Boodjamulla National Park has a limited number of camping sites and this prevents the areas being overused for recreation.

Camping: While most National Parks throughout Australia limit camping only to pre-approved and developed sites, Fraser Island stands out as the last bastion where free range camping is tolerated along vast stretches of foreshore where there are no facilities or amenities. This has now been shown to result in the annual deposition of to 4.3kg of faeces and 18.3 litres of urine for every lineal metre in beach camping zones.

Although the unsustainability of foreshore camping has been known for decades, moves to restrict and regulate such camping on Fraser Island to make it more sustainable have progressed at snail pace. It has resulted in slowly moving camping away from streams and Indian Head, banning open fires and assessing (but not enforcing) the maximum number of camps for each section of the beach but the idea of grasping the nettle and making it obligatory to pre-book the sites has been left in the "too-hard basket" for too long.

While vehicle based free-range camping has been banned in most Australian National Parks and World Heritage sites, it still exists on Fraser Island and this policy needs to be reviewed.

FIDO believes that the patterns of recreation on Fraser Island can be changed significantly, so as to improve the visitor experience and reduce the environmental impacts, by establishing a light rail people mover as an alternative means of experiencing some of Fraser Island's most significant attractions. This is probably the best solution.

7. Regulation

The most dramatic examples come from enforcing regulations. Regulations prevent horse riding in national parks, prevent open fires on Fraser Island, prevent people taking domestic animals into national parks, prevent people driving on roads when traffic is likely to damage the roads and other park infrastructure, close areas to camping in times of danger from fires or severe weather events, enforce quarantine measures, ban fishing or diving ... The list of regulations which we have come to accept is enormous. Such regulations are determined in the public interest and in the interests of achieving the objectives for which the national parks were established

Keeping the patterns of recreation on Fraser Island under constant review is a necessary prerequisite to ensuring the sustainability of visitation to Fraser Island. Changing them may be necessary in some cases to preserve the outstanding and universal World Heritage values for which Fraser Island is famous.