

Saving Fraser Island's Wild Dingoes

FIDO was the first to identify the importance and significance of the Fraser Island dingoes back in 1976 when John Sinclair wrote the first edition of "Discovering Fraser Island". He asserted then that Fraser Island "has the purest strain of dingo remaining in Eastern Australia". That statement has since been validated by DNA studies. The Fraser Island dingo is now recognized as one of the great natural values of this World Heritage site. FIDO is therefore not going to allow the integrity of this now rare and precious genetically pure race of animals to be threatened through mismanagement.

While FIDO questions many aspects of Fraser Island management, FIDO has seen no evidence that the dingo population on Fraser Island is threatened with extinction or that its genetic purity is under threat due to any current Queensland Government policies. This unique animal should be regarded as a wild top order predator on Fraser Island and therefore should not be artificially fed by any humans.

The significance of Fraser Island dingoes: FIDO members have been observing Fraser Island dingoes and dingo behaviour since the 1950s. They have also drawn on the accounts of dingo behaviour from FIDO veterans for a preceding 50 years. FIDO has invited dingo ecologists to address the problems to ensure that we are not adopting an unsustainable position. FIDO is committed to seeing the dingoes on Fraser Island survive and that their significance in World Heritage values is appropriately recognized.

Genetic purity: FIDO had learnt from Fraser Island residents in the 1970s that dingoes were not breeding with domestic dogs. Any male dogs taken to Fraser Island were in danger of their lives because they were liable to be killed by pack animals that regarded them as rivals. Indeed, before domestic dogs were banned from the island many were taken and killed by dingoes. If any male dingo mated with a female domestic dog taken to the island then, unless the bitch was accepted by the pack, a most unlikely scenario, her half dingo pups would have to be raised by the bitch's owners. There are no reports of even domestic pups being raised on Fraser Island and there has never been a suggestion that any hybrid dingoes were raised on the island.

Fraser Island human - dingo interactions: There was no risk to humans from dingo attacks on the island prior to the 1980s. Dingoes were rarely seen and those that were, were usually observed skulking near camps but at a safe distance. Dingoes only started to become emboldened as the visitor numbers to Fraser Island

escalated exponentially in the late 1980s and early 1990s. By the mid 90s there were so many incidents of aggressive behaviour of dingoes to humans that the Queensland Government developed its Dingo Management Strategy to address this major problem. The situation became more dire when in 2003 a young boy was attacked and killed by a dingo at Waddy Point.

Healthy Dingo Population on Fraser Island: Despite the subsequent culling and humane destruction of about 100 dingoes on Fraser Island since the 2003 incident, the island retains a healthy dingo population. In July 2010 after a very intensive effort, the Fraser Island Dingo Population Study Interim Report concluded that there were about 300 dingoes on the island. This indicates that 1998 estimate of *between 100 and 200 dingoes* may have been very conservative. The report concluded, "Taking into account the average size of dingo litters, pup mortality rates and the fact that generally only pups from alpha females survive, there are early indications dingoes are generally in good condition with respect to weight and reproduction."

QPWS Commitment: The above report also contains a clear statement by the Queensland Parks and Wildlife Service (QPWS) that it "has a legal responsibility to conserve National Park dingo

populations even though the dingo is a declared pest elsewhere in Queensland and Australia. Dingoes on Fraser Island have not crossbred with domestic or feral dogs to the same extent as most mainland populations, and in time they may become the purest strain of dingo on the eastern Australian seaboard and perhaps Australia wide. Therefore, their conservation is of national significance."

Many people, some media and a few politicians now subscribe to the view that Fraser Island dingoes are endangered and are starving towards extinction. They can produce lots of photographs of scrawny, malnourished dingoes. However it is a great example of selectively finding evidence to support a theory that isn't supported by all of the available evidence.

Nature can be very cruel. This is well demonstrated by Fraser Island dingoes. Due to population dynamics and pack structure, there are always going to be some outcast dingoes cut off from the security and nurture of the pack. Many of these will fail to survive. Some will be killed by rival dingoes if they intrude on their territory. Others will starve to death and in the process look very emaciated.

As long as there are good healthy dingoes still roaming the wilds of Fraser Island (and there is plenty of evidence to support that) FIDO doesn't believe that the population as a whole is unhealthy or malnourished.

Why Artificial Dingo Feeding is Disastrous

Establishing a regime on Fraser Island where dingoes are supplied with food by humans will result in a significant (perhaps exponential) explosion of the dingo population. It will create a huge drain on the resources to manage Fraser Island, and pose a huge ethical issue about the source of the food that might be fed to Fraser Island dingoes.

While it will help preserve the purity of the Fraser Island dingo gene pool, it will result in a huge disruption of the dingo social structure on Fraser Island, perhaps permanently converting a wild animal into a domestic animal no better than a domestic breed of dog. In addition to the behavioural changes this practice will induce, it will be an ecological disaster if the top order predator on Fraser Island opts out of its traditional role in the ecosystem and accepts only the free handouts from humans.

Advocates averse to seeing lean and hungry animals are urging the creation of dingo feeding stations around the island. These are some of the problems that will result from a feeding program:

- **Where does animal welfare stop?** As they opt for artificial feeding rather than hunting, Fraser Island dingoes will be no longer “wild”. They will be little more than domestic dogs. Presumably some people may also feel uncomfortable with wild animals having no shelter and opt for building shelters in the interests of animal welfare.
- **Population explosion:** Animal populations expand to utilize all of the available food resources. If there is more food supplied, the Fraser Island dingo population may well grow beyond the currently estimated 300. That would require an ever-increasing amount of food to be supplied particularly if the wild population predictably abandons its traditional predator role. The population can keep expanding exponentially as long as the food supply is kept up.
- **Source of the food:** Artificial feeding of carnivores such as the Fraser Island dingoes will pose an ethical dilemma for animal liberationists. It will mean that more domestic animals will need to be slaughtered to provide the meat.
- **Increased numbers of malnourished animals:** In any litter of pigs or pups there are always “runts” that receive less of the available food than their siblings. It can be anticipated then that a larger population will also result in more animals receiving less food and more looking emaciated.
- **Pack structure destruction:** Once former outcasts are able to breed outside the established pack structure, it will destroy the traditional dingo social order where a dominant Alpha Male and Alpha Female rule a pack. The evidence indicates that dingo attacks on humans are not from the

Alpha animals but from their social outcasts. Thus the number of dingo incidents might be expected to increase once the pack structure breaks down.

- **Weaker animals will survive to breed:** Feeding the weak will mean the end of the “survival of the fittest” principle. Weaker dingoes will survive to adulthood and probably begin breeding. The genetic strength and virility of the Fraser Island dingoes will be slowly but inexorably weakened.

- **Economic implications:** There will be significant costs and economic implications for an artificial dingo feeding program.

A political decision to discontinue such a program on grounds of affordability is always a possibility. Imagine the number of starving dingoes then. It would take a long time to re-establish a pack structure if a feeding programme was disrupted.

Ecological Implications: Whilst some may deplore the hunting practices of carnivores and its cruelty, the predator / prey

relationship is part of Nature. If dingoes cease to be hunters and opt to hang around artificial feed stations that will destroy the existing ecosystem. FIDO is convinced that Fraser Island is mercifully a fox-free zone and virtually free of feral cats because of the presence of the dingo. If dingoes cease to be Fraser Island’s top-order predators, then secondary order predators (cats and foxes) may decimate the island’s bird, reptile and small mammal populations.

While there are many aspects of Fraser Island management where the Fraser Island Defenders Organisation and the Queensland Parks and Wildlife Service differ, we do agree that feeding Fraser Island dingoes artificially is not in the interests of Fraser Island ecology or the dingoes. It won’t work. *Artificial or supplementary feeding should never be introduced.*

Feeding emaciated dingoes on Fraser Island will not solve the problem. It will only compound the problems and result in a greater number of emaciated dingoes.