

World Heritage for Cooloola

When the controversy over Fraser Island sandmining was reaching a crescendo in the early 1970s the CSIRO Division of Soils very astutely decided that the dune systems of Fraser Island and Cooloola needed a much better scientific understanding. They established a team to examine the dune systems of South East Queensland through the most detailed study ever undertaken in the dunes of Cooloola. It is on the basis of the information they have derived from their Cooloola research that Fraser Island received World Heritage status although none of the work was tested on Fraser Island. It was only inferred. Cooloola deserves its due recognition.

The CSIRO Cooloola Study

The late Bill Huxley meticulously summarized the work:

In 1974, scientists at the Brisbane laboratories of the CSIRO Division of Soils began a research project on the processes controlling the development and stability of coastal dune systems at Cooloola. This study of landscape dynamics arose from the Division's concern at the increasing denudation of Australian soils and landscapes. Cooloola was chosen because of advantages in initiating such a study in natural systems using quartz sand as study material, protection from human disturbances, and because there was little scientific data about these large coastal dune systems. (The findings would have application to other sandmasses to the north and south, especially to Fraser, Moreton, and North Stradbroke Islands).

As research at Cooloola progressed it established a long age sequence of dune systems in which parts of at least six systems had not been covered by successively younger deposits but had been continually exposed to soil development and changes in vegetation and water erosion since their deposition. These sites presented at least nine windows in time in the development from the first plants on bare sand (time zero) through rudimentary and well developed soil podzols to giant forms in which soil profile exceeded 26m in thickness (oldest dunes). Further it found that the vegetation changed in step with the increasing soil depth from the first plants to woodlands, forests, very tall forests (progressive succession) and then declined to woodlands and to heath (retrogressive succession) as the increasing depth to the soil B horizon placed further restrictions on root access to nutrients. These were exciting scientific findings as the work progresses it attracted an increasing number of national and international visitors, many of whom contributed their special skills to some aspect of the study. In all 45 scientists, 8 from the Brisbane Soils Group and 37 from other CSIRO laboratories, universities, State Departments, overseas institutions, or retired professionals collaborated in some respect. Their findings have so far been reported in 52 papers or book chapters, 20 conference papers and numerous lectures in Australia and overseas. There has been a strong demand for the published data both here and overseas for scientific, educational and managerial purposes; as one example it provided much of the scientific background for the excellent documentary on Fraser Island, "Sands of Time".

Choice of Cooloola: Leader of the CSIRO team, Cliff Thompson had selected Cooloola partly on the basis of the detailed botanical studies carried out by the leader of the hard-fought conservation campaign to protect Cooloola from sandmining and pine plantations led by Dr Arthur Harrold. There were also logistical reasons for choosing Cooloola. It was closer to Brisbane and it didn't require vehicular ferry access. It was also an area that wasn't then subject to a major on-going land-use controversy such as was enveloping Fraser, Moreton and North Stradbroke Islands.

History of the Cooloola Nomination

ACF identification: The Australian Conservation Foundation identified the World Heritage values of Cooloola before the CSIRO studies had advanced. In 1975 the ACF proposed that the Great Sandy Region (included both Fraser Island and Cooloola and the rich marine areas surrounding them) included on the World Heritage list. This was even before the World Heritage Treaty was operative.

Nomination prepared: The controversy over Fraser Island sandmining though resulted in entrenched opposition to the proposal from the Bjelke-Petersen government. Notwithstanding this the ACF funded the preparation of a World Heritage nomination for the region that was prepared in 1984 by Lee Hemmings and John Sinclair. This showed that the region met all four of the natural criteria for World Heritage when it only had to meet just one. The study was rejected by Bjelke-Petersen who said that he would not support "*one more inch of Queensland*" becoming World Heritage (after the Great Barrier Reef). That stalled the proposal until there was a change of government in Queensland in 1989.

Fitzgerald Inquiry: The election of the Goss Government meant that there was a change in Queensland's position on World Heritage. In 1990 Tony Fitzgerald QC was commissioned to examine the merits of the Great Sandy Region to determine whether a World Heritage nomination should proceed for any or all of the region. The Fitzgerald Commission of Inquiry found that the whole region qualified. The final report published maps and tables supporting its Findings in this regard. (pp 27-34 of the Commission of Inquiry into the Conservation Management and the Use of Fraser Island and the Great Sandy Region — May, 1991). Both the Australian and Queensland Governments agreed to proceed with the nomination and this was prepared and submitted by December 1991

The IUCN Assessment: In 1992 Dr James Thorsell was commissioned by the IUCN, technical advisors to the World Heritage Committee on nominations of natural sites to examine the merits of the Great Sandy Region nomination.

Queensland's Department of Environment and Heritage made many fundamental blunders in organizing his Great Sandy Region field inspections. They failed to allow him to meet with many people who strongly supported the inclusion of Cooloola including the eminent CSIRO soil scientist Cliff Thompson and John Sinclair who was not even told that Thorsell was in Queensland. Instead the people who met with Thorsell were only people opposed to including Cooloola, particularly the Noosa North Shore part. After Thorsell's flawed inspection and subsequent discussions with Queensland and Federal bureaucrats, the World Heritage nomination was reduced to Fraser Island and the Cooloola National Park only. The proposed Great Sandy Strait Marine Park, Tin Can Inlet and the relevant foreshores, the Tin Can Bay Military Training area Inskip Point and the Noosa North Shore were excluded from the final recommendation.

Australian Government's response: As a result of Thorsell's response the Australian Government revised the nomination again without any discussions with the people like Arthur Harrold who had spent half a lifetime working to identify the natural values of Cooloola and to ensure that they were properly protected. It was Harrold and Huxley who had the vision and foresight to have the outer boundaries of Cooloola extend to include the whole upper catchment of the Noosa River using the Como Scarp watershed between the catchments of the Mary and the Noosa Rivers as the boundary. Previously the Queensland Government had drawn a straight line in the map as their proposed western boundary of Cooloola. It was Arthur Harrold who identified the botanical differences between the Cooloola sandmass and the Western Catchment of the Noosa River. Yet these people were not informed that the Commonwealth was withdrawing Cooloola from the nomination. None of the principal advocates for Cooloola's inclusion were aware of this when the World Heritage Committee held its 16th Session in Santa Fe (USA) in December 1992.

The response from the Commonwealth to the outrage when only Fraser Island was inscribed was that they were committed to re-nominating Cooloola at another time when the issues on which Thorsell based his opposition to Cooloola had been dealt with.

FIDO's Reaction: John Sinclair sought advice on how to proceed to protest about Thorsell's flawed assessment from former Australian Ambassador to UNESCO Hon E.G Whitlam. While Whitlam was sympathetic he gave compelling reasons why we should abide by "*the umpire's decision*" — however flawed it was. Thus FIDO's protest was muted.

Frustrating Wait: Within a few years the issues that Thorsell saw as problems were resolved. The Queensland Government was determined to have Cooloola added to the list. During this period additional World Heritage values including the fens had been recognized.

Assessment of Cooloola's OUV: In 1997 the Fraser Island Scientific Advisory Committee that then included Cliff Thompson sought funds to undertake an assessment of Fraser Island's World Heritage values. Eventually a small Commonwealth grant was made to enable a review of the Outstanding Universal Value (OUV) of Fraser Island. This was to be a most comprehensive review. The then Queensland Environment Minister Rod Welford opportunistically decided to contribute State funding to enable the an assessment of the OUV for Cooloola to be carried out in conjunction with the review of Fraser Island but treated separately. The culmination of a comprehensive literature review were two workshops in November 1999 attended by leading scientists who had any connections with Fraser Island to consider how each of Fraser Island and Cooloola measured up to the World Heritage criteria. The workshops to identify values were led by World Heritage authority Bing Lucas and resulted in separate reports for Fraser Island and Cooloola. The Scientific Advisory Committee received the report in 2000 but the publication languished and it took the Queensland Environmental Protection Agency four years to finally publish the the reports in 2004. The two reports: "Cooloola — Assessment of Potential Outstanding Universal Value" and "Fraser Island World Heritage Review of Outstanding Universal Value" showed that Cooloola had marginally more World Heritage values than Fraser Island had.

Changes in the Rules: While the EPA stalled the rules on World Heritage Listing were changing at both the national and the international level. At a national level the rules for nomination of further Australian sites was to be limited to a maximum of one per annum and the site nominated must first be inscribed on the National Heritage List. Also a number of other Australian candidates for World Heritage listing had jumped into the queue ahead of the Fraser Island and Cooloola renomination. Purnululu and Ningaloo had been listed as natural sites and three cultural sites had been listed since 2000. The process has slowed down remarkably. At the international level the World Heritage Committee had demanded that no site be nominated unless it was in the national indicative list. At the beginning of 2012 there were only two sites on the indicative list These were of the Gondwana World Heritage Area (renomination) and the renomination of the Great Sandy Region.

Queensland Process: The Queensland Environment Minister Kate Jones had begun the process of renomination by releasing a discussion paper and calling for public comment on the proposed boundaries in 2010. The process looked to be well advanced. The Queensland Government had also engaged a consultant to begin the drafting of the new nomination.

The Newman Government's position: The election of the Newman Government in March 2012 put an end to the process of renomination of the Great Sandy. The new government announced that it would be pushing ahead with a World Heritage nomination for Cape York Peninsula for even though it had not met the prerequisites for nomination. In October 2012 the Environment Minister was advised of a resolution: *We, the members of the Joint Advisory Committees for the Fraser Island World Heritage Area (FIWHA), strongly advise the Minister to reconsider activating and progressing the nomination for the Cooloola extension of the FIWHA.* He responded by advising that the State would not be proceeding but the Commonwealth could.

