

**Fraser Island and the sands of time.  
From Confrontation to Collaboration;  
The Fraser Island Environmental Inquiry 40 years on.  
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This symposium looks at the scientific significance of Fraser Island. My paper considers the social and historic context for the protection and the appreciation of the island and argues for the need for the science to be interpreted in an accessible way both for the benefit of visitors and to support the continued conservation of the island.

I will draw upon my experience as an advisor to the Commonwealth Fraser Island Environmental Inquiry in 1975-6 to demonstrate the critical importance of interpretation to the conservation of the island.

By interpretation I mean; to explain, to understand, to appreciate, to elucidate, to communicate, to educate. (Defined by the Shorter Oxford as; to expound the meaning of; to render clear or explicit; to elucidate or explain.)

The Fraser Island Environmental Inquiry was appointed by E. G. Whitlam on 12 July 1975 under the Environment Protection (Impact of Proposals) Act 1974. It was directed to inquire *in respect of all of the environmental aspects of the making of decisions by or on behalf of the Australian Government in relation to the exportation from Australia of minerals extracted or which here after may be extracted from Fraser Island.* The Commissioners appointed to conduct the inquiry were required to report findings and recommendations to the Minister for the Environment.

Hearings were commenced in Maryborough on 5 August 1975 following a week long inspection of the island. The hearings were conducted over 31 days and concluded on 3 October. In total, one hundred witnesses gave evidence to the inquiry. There were 3496 pages of transcript and 658 exhibits were presented to the inquiry. Evidence was received from the leading scientists in their fields, from commercial and community interests, from the indigenous community, from industry and the Commonwealth Government. The inquiry received evidence from the full range of commercial, community and scientific experts who had an interest in the island at that time. (With the exception of the Queensland Government and Dillingham's the sand miner who boycotted the inquiry).

The Commissioners reported to the Minister for Environment under the new Fraser Government on 21 October 1976. Without delay that government acted to implement the inquiry's recommendations to record the whole of Fraser Island as part of the National Estate and to prohibit absolutely all exports of minerals extracted from Fraser Island except for minerals extracted from below the mean high water mark on the eastern beach south of Indian Head.

Save for the stated exception there has been no sand mining on Fraser Island since and the whole of the island was registered on the National Estate on 13. 9. 1977.

Looking back forty years it is easy to lose sight of the social context of the Inquiry which was the first environmental inquiry conducted by the Australian Government. There was a national campaign to protect Fraser Island the like of which I believe had not been seen previously with the possible exception of the unsuccessful campaign to save Lake Pedder. The issue caused one of the first union green bans: the Furniture Trades Union banned work on the completion of the multi story headquarters of the American Mining Company at the centre of the controversy. The issue divided the local community. The leading advocate for the islands protection was booed when he led his scout troop onto the arena at the Maryborough Show.

The inquiry itself was very controversial; it was boycotted by the Queensland Government and the Company who owned the most valuable mining leases. It survived a constitutional challenge in the High Court and yet, its recommendations achieved prompt implementation by a Government of the opposite political persuasion to that which had initiated the inquiry.

Having achieved its purpose what then is the relevance of this Inquiry and its Report to Fraser Island over 40 years later? I would like to identify two major points of relevance to today:

1. Firstly the Inquiry brought together the leading scientific experts in a range of fields as well as leaders in the community each of whom gave evidence of their unique perspective on the environmental values of the island. Its findings and recommendations presented a holistic interpretation of the environmental values of the island in clear terms which were highly accessible and which government was able to act on to achieve their protection.
2. Secondly the Inquiry achieved rare bipartisan support for its recommendations at a time of much polarised political opinion. Labor initiated the Inquiry and a Liberal/National Government implemented all its recommendations.

In 1975 I was privileged as a young law graduate to learn first hand from the experts about Fraser Island's scientific significance; I learnt that Fraser Island was not just the biggest sand island in the world but that the dunes could reveal ancient secrets about the history of our continent and the story of climate change over millennium. I learnt that the fresh water lakes were not just very beautiful and great for a swim on a hot day but also had a story to tell about vegetation patterns in Australia going back millennium. A scientific explanation of the origin of the mineral sands introduced my

mind to a whole new concept of time and space. Mrs Olga Miller spoke at the hearing about visiting the island with her Grandfather when she was a child and I learnt something about the values of the island from the perspective of its traditional aboriginal owners and now Native Title Holders, the Butchulla People.

Based on the evidence provided, the Inquiry found that the island has outstanding scientific significance for future generations; These included *inter alia*:

- The dune geomorphology was considered one of the most important features of Fraser Island in that it exhibits the greatest number of distinct and independent dune systems found anywhere in the world and for the information this reveals about climate history. (10),
- The distinctive frog and fish fauna including a new species of fish were identified as requiring further study, and the preservation of their habitat to be of considerable scientific importance. (25).
- The forests of satinay were identified as particularly important for the information they provide about species distribution since similar forests have been destroyed on the mainland.(26)
- The fresh water lakes on Fraser Island were the subject of much interest during the Inquiry and described as having outstanding aesthetic and scientific interest. (23).

Although not falling directly within its terms of reference the Commission made a number of suggestions as to how these scientific values might be respected and valued, some of these suggestions are still relevant today.

The need for ongoing scientific research and education is supported by the inquiry:

*“While the Commission was impressed by this comprehensive body of factual material, it nevertheless agrees wholeheartedly with numerous witnesses who observed that a great deal remains to be learned about the natural environment of Fraser Island. It is very clear from much of the evidence before the Commission that Fraser Island will play a continuing and increasingly important role as a “natural laboratory” for investigators in many fields of study. In this respect the Commission concurs with the several witnesses who suggested that there appears to be an excellent case for the establishment of a permanent scientific station on Fraser Island which could be used as a base to conduct research and to monitor environmental change. Furthermore, the diversity and complexity of the natural environment of the Island provides rich opportunities for secondary and tertiary level teaching and research.” (7)*

The questions I now ask are how is this information interpreted and shared today? How do we demonstrate our appreciation of the environmental values of Fraser Island? And is protection alone sufficient to conserve these values?

Last year I returned to the island as a volunteer to do some rehabilitation work with FIDO , my first visit in 40 years. First thing I noticed was the absence of sand mining of course, and then the heavy traffic on the beach. I noticed strong protection for sites where there was heavy tourist traffic for example at Eli Creek where I counted 12 four wheel drives, 5 buses and 3 aircraft.

A feature of the Island today is the cooperation of the whole range of interests in the conservation of the island, between government, state and local, conservationists, commercial interests and native title holders. The Fraser Island Natural Integrity Alliance (FINIA) has been formed as an informal grouping of interests. The alliance functions on the ground in an informal way, about practical issues. I witnessed a great spirit of practical cooperation on the ground about the rehabilitation of the natural vegetation for example.

There was evidence in many places about work done by the National Parks Service to protect the island but, where was the information about why the island is worthy of protection? I looked and looked wherever I went.

There were boards at Central Station with the world heritage emblem on it. But no where did I notice any interpretation of those environmental values which caused the island to be recognized as a part of the Heritage of the World and caused both sides of Federal politics to combine to ensure its protection. I did not go everywhere but I was simply gob smacked by the lack of any serious interpretation of the islands outstanding scientific and environmental values.

How can the interested visitor learn about the geomorphic significance of the sand dunes? Where did all this sand come from? Do the tourists who enjoy a dip in Mackenzie Lake have any idea of the significance of what they are swimming in? Do the kids from the safari bus floating down Eli Creek have any understanding of what makes the hydrology of the island so significant or the value of the pristine rain forest protected by the board walk they walk along? Why was Fraser Island listed as World Heritage in 1992. and what was all that fuss about in 1975 about sandmining? And where can the curious overseas tourist ask their persistent questions; “Were there aboriginal people here and where are they now?” Apparently there are some boards at Lake Mackenzie which I must have missed.

Fraser Island has a story to tell. This story is not at all obvious to the casual visitor enjoying the beach, the lakes and the forest. It is a big story, a story about the sands of time, a story of world significance, a social history of confrontation and collaboration, of conflict and reconciliation. I would also think this story is particularly relevant during a time of fear about climate change.

Is it sufficient just to protect an environmental asset like Fraser Island? Humanity has always felt the need to express its appreciation of nature. Such appreciation is expressed in different ways by different cultures, by art, by dance, in literature and in western culture also by interpretation. There is a risk that without the expression of appreciation, nature will not be valued and its scientific and environmental assets will be depreciated.

I call for the development of an interpretation strategy to inform and educate the public on Fraser Islands World Heritage values. Such a strategy will need to be flexible and worthy of the World Heritage Status of the Island and will also of course need to have the support of the Butchulla People, the Native Title Holders.

(\*) refers to pages in the Final Report of the Commission of Inquiry

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