

## **A Better Corporate Memory for Fraser Island**

### **John Sinclair**

To have a clear vision of what Fraser Island in 2020 it is first necessary to have a proper perspective of what Fraser Island was like in the past. We need to know where we have come from to have a better idea of where we are going and the best way to get there. Without that we could soon be going backwards without realising it. That is why a corporate memory is so critical.

It becomes even more critical when there is such a critical limited budget to manage Fraser Island with that we can only make the best use of these resources by being well focussed and an appreciation of some basic Fraser Island history. For example, I find it difficult to grasp that many people regard free-range camping along the eastern beach of Fraser Island as a “tradition” even though no free range camping occurred along the eastern beach at all prior to 1968 when Gordon Elmer began a small ferry service. However, I shouldn’t be surprised when I note the very short period it took for “Schoolies’ Week” to become a “tradition” amongst the young.

Luckily FIDO has possessed a comprehensive memory of Fraser Island acquired during over 33 years of continuous participation, research and analysis. This has been aided by a great continuity in the organization. Good corporate memories not only know the history but are able to relate them to the associated events. For example, it was because of FIDO’s strong (some may say strident) advocacy to stop Fraser Island sandmining in the early 1970’s that the Bjelke-Petersen Government made its first major concession to conservation by creating the Queensland National Parks and Wildlife Service in Queensland in 1974. Thus FIDO has a much longer memory of the campaign to protect Fraser Island than any State government agency.

Continuity is critical to developing a corporate memory. FIDO’s memory is healthy because most FIDO Executive members have been associated with our efforts for at least 25 years. In contrast, no current officer of the EPA/QPWS with management responsibilities for Fraser Island has held their position for five years. Unfortunately, large organizations such as the EPA always provide advancement opportunities for talented officers. Thus most of the very capable officers who deal with Fraser Island inevitably move up the ladder. Then their Fraser Island experience just enhances their CVs as they address different responsibilities. It is unlikely therefore that there will ever be in the EPA will remain there long enough to provide it with a good corporate memory.

The majority of Fraser Island visitors lack a clear memory of what Fraser Island was like and are unable to make good comparisons. Huge flocks of black swans occurred along Great Sandy Strait in the lee of Fraser Island up to about 1970. They disappeared without any person noting or recording their disappearance.

Likewise, most people see places on Fraser Island now and think that they are wonderful — and they still are. However, had they seen them previously they would be in a position to objectively compare each site and any changes between their visits.

For example, it is important to visualise what Eli Creek looked like in the early 1970s when there were fewer than 20,000 visitors to Fraser Island annually. Until the recent break out of the new mouth, people thought that Eli Creek was one of Fraser Island’s greatest attractions. However, they had never seen it when it was really pristine. Few people saw Eli Creek in its most pristine state because it took only a few thousand pairs of feet to trample it into a hugely degraded site.

Within a decade it had deteriorated so significantly that in 1981 when FIDO unilaterally undertook to build a boardwalk there with its own resources and voluntary effort. It was a formidable effort with many obstacles but

## A Better Corporate Memory for Fraser Island 2

with 18 weekends of voluntary work FIDO created the first boardwalk on Fraser Island along exactly the route of the present boardwalk. We also provided the first public toilets along the eastern beach and built a picnic shed.

FIDO's Eli Creek project was such a success that the Bjelke-Petersen government was shamed in actively addressing the visitor impacts on Fraser Island. Until 1985 Bjelke-Petersen wanted to see Fraser Island run down so that he could legitimately claim that tourists were doing more damage than the sand-miners. The Eli Creek project led Parliament to pass the Fraser Island Recreation Area Management Act, (the forerunner of the current RAM Act) back. The Board's first task was to replace all evidence of FIDO's work at Eli Creek. This was done at a cost in 1985 of \$345,000. Introduction of the FIRA Act also resulted in Fraser Island getting its the Management Plan although this only was to manage recreation. Thus FIDO's advocacy in one direction resulted in the Bjelke-Petersen Government reacting in unpredictable directions.

The sudden and dramatic deterioration of Eli Creek in less than a decade made it possible to easily identify and illustrate that it had changed and that management was needed to address the problem. What happens when the changes are much slower and less obvious?

Some of the changes we have observed in our 33 years as being the Watchdog of Fraser Island include the following:

1. The denudation of the foredune areas from free-range camping.
2. The rapid encroachment of vegetation into the sandblows
3. The increase in the beach spinifex
4. The changes to the foredune with much thicker vegetation cover
5. The changes in the understorey which is now denser than at any time we have seen it
6. The increasing number of tree collapses at Wanggoolba Creek
7. The dramatic increase in the occurrence of weeds all over the island.
8. The increase in the numbers of seagulls along the beach coinciding with the decimation of the Pied Oyster-catcher and Red-capped Dotterel populations.
9. The movement of sand from all picnic areas including filling up the swale behind Lake McKenzie and burying the picnic table legs in many other places.
10. The growth of the alluvial plumes flowing into the lakes associated with the down-cutting of the roads
11. The widening of the roads and the associated "Banksia Serial Killing".
12. The increasing impact evident on walking tracks.

The list could go on but many of these changes are slow and couldn't be observed without a clear prior knowledge of the state of the environment on Fraser Island as it used to be. The further back we can remember, the easier it is to make better comparisons.

There are some aids to establishing the memory needed for good management. Photos are one. That is why FIDO is placing a heavy emphasis on building up a photographic record. Only two weeks ago I was on an inspection of Fraser Island with EPA officers and as we passed the swamp adjacent to the old DM mine which I knew so well I suddenly realised that melaleucas were spreading out into what had previously been a treeless area. Having old photographs available helps reassure me that it was not my imagination that the area was previously treeless. I don't know what has caused the melaleucas to invade but I suspect that it is a result of a drier climate regime. However, I wouldn't have even began to address the issue if I hadn't had a memory of what it was like before.

### **A Better Corporate Memory for Fraser Island 3**

There is one area of corporate memory that can't be easily aided by photographs and that is the experience of being on Fraser Island and how that has changed. I well remember sitting in the back of Dad's ute back in 1972 driving across the island and having the roadside vegetation so close that I could reach out and pick the fragrant Carroll leaves as we passed. The widening of roads started to become apparent in 1974 which is when we first proposed the light rail. With a light rail it will again be possible to allow vegetation to grow to almost within arm's reach of the passengers. In the early 1970s the roads were not as rough as they are now because the root mat was intact and there was negligible down-cutting. A light rail could also restore some comfort to the magical crossing of the island so that people could focus on their environs rather than their security.

FIDO has undertaken a lot of research into the various light rail options and its feasibility. We have tabled a proposal for building a light rail between Eurong and Kingfisher Resorts. I don't plan to elaborate on that proposal here. I only want to point out that because there are few in the EPA with the memory of what has proceeded and the history as well the recognizing the unsustainable impacts that the roads are having on the Fraser Island environment. The degradation of the iconic lakes of Fraser Island due to infilling and the unnatural collapse trees between Wanggoolba Creek and the existing road above can't be allowed to continue. It is perhaps this lack of memory which has to EPA inclined to abandon all thoughts of a light rail and want to persist with the existing unsustainable network of roads.

No Vision for Fraser Island in 2020 would be complete if it failed to consider the combined effect of the fire regime, the weed invasion and climate change.

The virtue of having a long memory is that it helps to recognize the long term environmental changes. It led FIDO to develop a much stronger advocacy for a better fire regime because we could see the results of the poor fire regime in changes to the composition and structure of the vegetation patterns. Hopefully the Fire Management Plan will be fine tuned quickly to get the desired outcomes.

It was also FIDO's long term observations which has us so heavily focussed on the need to bring the weeds under control. Without a proper appreciation of the rate of infestation and the changes this is causing it is easy to become complacent about the need to bring this under control now. The invasion of weeds threatens Fraser Island's ecological integrity even more than the fire regime in the long term.

Weeds though are not the only foreign invaders which threaten the integrity of Fraser Island and some of its World Heritage values. We already have cane toads and rats but the feral cattle went about 1980, the brumbies have almost gone, and we have so far avoided pigs, foxes, goats and rabbits. However, the door remains wide open for all sorts of damaging organisms to come into Fraser Island inadvertently or accidentally. The advantage Fraser Island has is the big moat surrounding it but without some stronger measures to stop people by accident or otherwise carrying injurious agencies on to the island then by 2020 the island will not have the same integrity that it has now.

There is already an apparent change to Fraser Island's climate regime if the disappearance of the sandblows is any guide to go by. There is not much that we as local managers on our own can do to address the global climate change. However even the small step we take in establishing a light rail would be some contribution to reducing the greenhouse gas emissions coming from Fraser Island.

In considering what Fraser Island will look like in 2020 we should consider that one consequence of climate change is that sea levels will rise and this, combined with stronger wind regimes will exacerbate coastal erosion. While the time scale is still not yet clear it seems likely that the rise of one metre in the sea levels as predicted will result in the erosion of about 5 percent of Fraser Island, manly in the Moon Point and North Spit areas. The

## A Better Corporate Memory for Fraser Island 4

erosion at Moon Point has already begun whittling away part of Fraser Island. All of this land which was created about 5,500 to 6,000 years ago when the sea levels dropped by just one metre, is likely to be eroded away as a direct result of climate change.

So while ecotourism has a lot of positives it also implicitly carries a huge amount of destructive potential. The positives are mainly spiritual, aesthetic and economic. (Some may classify spiritual, aesthetic under a heading of “recreational” but I believe this is an oversimplification of the values people derive from their Fraser Island experience. The negatives are almost all environmental. However, with good management we can reduce the environmental impacts to make visitation more sustainable but the key to it is in changing the existing patterns of recreation.

Looking ahead to 2020, we can neither afford to relax our vigilance, nor overlook of the changes that have already occurred and which may be still going on.

Thus it can be seen just why a corporate memory is so critical to the future of Fraser Island. The problem is how can it be best strengthened and reinforced. After deliberating on this issue for the past 25 years, I can only conclude that the only way to develop such a memory is to ensure more continuity than the EPA has been so far unable to provide. This opinion has been reinforced by my study of the management of another Australian World Heritage site, Lord Howe Island, over the past 16 years. The New South Wales Parliament created a Lord Howe Island Board back in 1953 and after 51 years reinforced the decision with some minor amendments to the Act earlier this year. That in itself is some testimony to the fact that, although there may be room for improvement, it is working well.

Because there is a background paper outlining the case for a single authority in more detail with the conference papers, I don't expect to delve too deeply into its structure or how it could work. I would only point out that with a smaller and more permanent bureaucracy we could expect longer terms of service from staff and an accumulation of the vital ingredient in managing Fraser Island continuity.

**John Sinclair** was the founding president of the Fraser Island Defenders Organization back in 1971. Since then he has headed all of FIDO's campaigns since to cease sandmining, to get World Heritage recognition and simultaneously to stop logging and to improve the management of recreation on the island. He has been active in monitoring the use of the island to ensure that FIDO's aim of the “wisest use of Fraser Island's natural resources” is being carried out.

He was named "*Australian of the Year*" for 1976 for his leading role in protecting Fraser Island. He was awarded the prestigious international Goldman Environmental Prize in 1993. Apart from being the author of a number of books about both Fraser Island and Cooloola, he has played an active role in working with the Queensland Government in a consultative role through the Community Advisory Committee.

He helped FIDO become an Australian pioneer in ecotourism back in 1971 with the first of hundreds of safaris to the island designed to educate, to monitor, to recruit supporters and to be profitable. In 1988 expanded on this experience when he began GO BUSH Safaris to become Australia's World Heritage specialist. Although this is a small company he annually visiting most Australian World Heritage areas.

He remains active at all levels of the conservation movement including being a Councillor with the Australian Conservation Foundation. His wide experience and wide geographic perspective through GO BUSH Safaris, plus his accumulated knowledge of Fraser Island and conservation issues generally enable him to make a very positive contribution in developing a vision for Fraser Island in 20-20.