

# GREAT SANDY REGION: THE WORLD HERITAGE VISION

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A 2020 VISION FOR FRASER ISLAND  
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## **Introduction**

One thing that every conservationist knows is that the work is never finished. Looking back through we can usually see that there were certain events or developments which significantly advanced our cause. Generally these breakthroughs were not accidents. They were major goals which we had decided to pursue, often a meetings like this one.

To take some relevant examples, in the early 1960s, the National Parks Association of Queensland (NPAQ) decided to press for national parks at both Coolooloa and Fraser Island. Then, 30 years ago in May 1974, the Council of the Australian Conservation Foundation (ACF) decided to work for the inclusion of Fraser Island on the World Heritage List. Three years later, with the Fraser Island Defenders Organisation (FIDO), the ACF expanded the concept to include Coolooloa and later, by stages in 1984 and 1990, added extensive marine areas and parts of the mainland shoreline to the proposal, with the name of The Great Sandy Region. It was not until 1992, 18 years on, that Fraser Island, about a fifth of the proposed World Heritage Area, was inscribed on the World Heritage List.

At this conference, we have to opportunity to map out our plans for the next 16 years. Obviously a major aim should be the completion of the World HeritageArea project, but there is also the need to work out how we can make the most of the Fraser Island section of the World Heritage Area.

Where does such a programme sit in the wider scheme of things? The world we live in is in a terrible mess, but we Australians generally do not experience first-hand the human suffering which goes with it. Is our involvement with conserving a place like the Great Sandy a distraction from global realities or does it have a positive role to play in the movement to save the Earth and, if so, what is that role? Those are questions I believe we need to answer.

I want to talk about three things. First: the world heritage concept and the contribution it can make to the welfare of the community and the wider environmental mission. Second: the renomination to bring the left-out areas into the World Heritage Area. Third: management - are we making the most of the opportunities?

I will conclude with some suggestions about a programme of action to realise a 2020 vision for a fully extended Great Sandy World Heritage Area.

## **The world heritage concept: its relevance to us all**

On the world stage, the idea of world heritage grew out of the national parks concept and was initiated in 1965 in the United States of America. Note that this was after the first park proposals had been made in the Great Sandy Region by the NPAQ.

The notion was simple: just as national parks are important to the people of the nation, certain areas are part of the heritage of all mankind.

Russell Train was one of the founders of the idea. At the Second World Conference on National Parks in 1972, speaking of it as an idea whose time had come, he put it this way:

*This is the idea that challenges the spirit. It is the idea that gives eloquent expression through cooperative international action to the truth that the earth is indeed man's home and belongs to us all.*

Compare that to the view expressed by a mining warden who was hearing mining lease applications in the Great Sandy Region at the same time as this grand new proposal was emerging. If the mining did cause some disturbance to the environment, he said, it did not really matter because man's destiny was to leave this planet and settle on distant worlds.

So the first wider value I see in world heritage is that it is an affirmation of our willingness to work positively and hopefully for the conservation of the Earth. We ARE here to stay and it DOES matter what we do to the environment. Maintaining the Earth's liveability should be our number one goal.

World heritage areas, as with national parks, show the need to do something to protect the interest of future generations, an approach which needs to be applied to our dealings with all parts of the environment through adopting sustainable ways of living.

Finally, of immense importance, I believe, is the way world heritage demonstrates the significance of international cooperation. The size and global nature of the world's environmental crisis is such that we must have more effective action at the international level. While this may be obvious, the reality is that at present, the authority of the key body, the United Nations, has been seriously undermined by unilateralist action taken in the short term interest of certain nations rather than the long-term interest of all nations.

Each world heritage area is a living example of these truths and should be regarded as a source of inspiration and encouragement for the community in general and the environmental activist in particular. They are, if you like, our home bases for the struggle to save the Earth.

There are many ways in which these values can be transmitted. One very neglected one is the inspiration and lessons we can gain from the stories of the battles to conserve these areas. It was not so very long ago that logging, mining, pine plantations and cattle-grazing were thought of by governments and officials as the prime land uses of the Great Sandy. Now that is unthinkable. What is more, Fraser Island was one of the main places where the concept of a national heritage area was first applied in Australia.

All of the main mining lease applications at Cooloola were refused. Mining was stopped on Fraser Island. Logging was ended in both places. The pine planting did not go ahead. How did all this happen? What brought about this tremendous turnaround in under two decades? The history of this is an integral part of the heritage of the Great Sandy.

Although I cannot tell this story here, what I can say is that the success of the conservation movement in the Great Sandy Region demonstrated a number of things which are vital to success in the wider struggle. These are a realistic understanding of what we are up against; a sense of purpose; an optimistic, undaunted outlook; a plan of action; and the support of the community. Above all It shows that having a grand plan capable of seizing the moral high ground, such as the world heritage project, is crucial. Also, of course, it reminds us that the main drive must come from the voluntary groups.

So much for the value of the lessons of history for the wider struggle. Probably even more important is what the environment itself can impart. I think the starting point of this consideration needs to be the nature of humans. We have an intense biological need for close and regular contact with nature. As far as we westerners are concerned, our current gross disconnect is only a few hundred years old out of the millions of years of our existence.

So, high on my list of the ways such protected areas can help us is the opportunity they can provide for close contact with nature. We can gain this contact through recreation, research or study. 'Recreation' is a very apposite term. It is an activity that satisfies natural curiosity, the urge to wander and the urge to escape from the artificial conditions of modern life - to once more experience the ancestral environment.

Then there is the way in which such contact, either as a conservationist, or as a visitor, can help with the adjustment of our value systems. This is particularly important because it helps us to see the world as being more than a storehouse of material goods to meet short-term needs. It is society's current dominant value systems and the institutions that have been developed to facilitate their dominance which are wrecking the Earth. They treat the world's resources as though they were unlimited and capable of meeting ever-growing demands.

A new value system has to be found in which the goals are not only intra- and inter-generational equity but also the treatment of the Earth as the home of all its inhabitants, not just humans. One where the sustainable development concept is applied to the management of the environment for non-consumptive as well as consumptive uses. At Fraser Island and Cooloola hard battles were fought against similar forces, and won – an encouraging sign.

The beauty of nature, including wild animals such as whales, have a vital role to play in all this. Professor Manning Clark put this point well when he spoke at a public meeting in Hobart about another area which soon after became part of the world's heritage: the Franklin River. If conserved, he said, it could be a place where:

*all of those who come hereafter will learn about beauty, about awe, about wonder, because it is in the South West that you have the chance to solve the mysteries at the heart of things*

We desperately need a new foundation for our lives, a new storyline, and what better than that of environmentalism.

Those scientists who have the fortunate task of trying to unlock the mysteries of the environment – how our present landforms evolved and the nature of the ongoing geomorphological and biological processes – will also be exposed to this value-shifting experience as well as making a contribution to the value of such areas for study.

The use of protected areas as an educational resource is the other major way they can help us be better adjusted in our relationship with the environment in general. World heritage areas are selected for their *outstanding universal values*. They must be amongst the best of their kind in the world. The dune, lake and vegetation systems of the Great Sandy and the surrounding marine and wetlands have much to teach about the evolution of the Earth as a whole over the last 700,000 years. We need this information to be better able to understand what we ourselves are doing to the Earth and the dynamic natural systems which are the context of our impacts.

Although I have mentioned several ways of benefiting from the environment of the Great Sandy, the truth is that these types of experiences are closely connected. Recreation can be an educational

experience and *vice versa*. Every visitor is a potential pupil. Even more important is the fact that the inspiration, environmental awareness and educational value extends beyond the experience of the visit through photographs, films, television, books, poetry, art, songs and so on. They help to consolidate and extend the memories of visits to this and other natural places and these responses have a ripple effect, inspiring our efforts in other spheres of environmental action.

Put simply, world heritage areas have the potential to be the greatest educational and awareness-raising centres in the world. They have a capacity far beyond any university, library, laboratory or museum. They can be all of these, and more.

### **Finishing the job: getting the world heritage values and boundary right**

Governments are very cautious bodies and usually move too slowly for we advocates. Even so, frustrated as we are, with hindsight we can often see the sense of their deliberate approach. The vested interests have to be outmanoeuvred and governments must feel confident they have the backing of the public before they move forward.

In May 1974, it took the federal Minister for the Environment, Moss Cass, less than three weeks to agree with the ACF that Fraser Island deserved consideration as World Heritage. That was a good beginning, but by the end of the year, DM Minerals had been given export approval. More importantly, in March 1975, the Fraser Island Environmental Inquiry was appointed. The Commission accepted the conservation group submissions about the significance of the natural values and the fact that they related to the total environment, not just special parts. It was also at the Inquiry that the ACF suggested that the name Great Sandy be extended from the small national park at the northern end of Fraser Island to cover the whole of Fraser Island and Cooloola.

The positive outcome of the Inquiry is well known. It was accepted that the protection of national and world heritage values was a justification for the mineral exports ban and, in December 1976, the Federal Environment Minister, Kevin Newman, told Parliament of his intention to nominate Fraser Island for the World Heritage List.

It was another 15 years before a nomination was made, and it required yet another inquiry – the Fitzgerald Inquiry into Fraser Island and the Great Sandy Region – to once again temporarily remove the government road blocks. The report was released in May 1991 and it was not long before it was decided that the whole of the extended Great Sandy Region (860,000 hectares) would be nominated by October 1991. Having made the nomination, halfway through, the federal government got cold feet and contracted the nomination to Fraser Island and Cooloola.

As they say, there is many a slip ..., and why only the 184,000 hectare Fraser Island was listed in 1992 by the World Heritage Committee deserves a detailed exposition. Suffice it to say that it is my view that the quality of the advice from IUCN, the advisory body, was very flawed.

On hearing the news, then-Premier Goss said his Government would continue to press for the nomination of the whole Great Sandy Region, and the Cooloola section, at least, has had bi-partisan support ever since. A World Heritage Expert Panel, convened as part of the Regional Forest Agreement process, found in favour of Cooloola in terms of its landforms and vegetation but this body's assessments did not extend to the important world heritage selection criteria related to integrity. Subsequent studies by the Fraser Island World Heritage Area Scientific Advisory Committee, limited to Fraser Island and Cooloola, have concluded that both areas satisfy all four natural property criteria and not just the two for which Fraser Island was listed. Neither this body, nor any other have carried out similarly rigorous examinations of the remaining two thirds of the 1991 nomination area.

Although there is not enough time for me to reiterate the case in detail, I must comment that it was ludicrous that the area's nomination for being an outstanding example of a major stage in Earth's evolutionary history and as having significant habitats of threatened species were not accepted by the World Heritage Committee in 1992. Also, one does not have to consider the matter very hard to recognise, first: that the inclusion of Coloola extends the values and increases the integrity of the sand mass part of the Region; and, second, that apart from also containing world heritage features in their own right, the marine and littoral areas a part of the natural region which includes the sand masses. Hervey Bay and the Great Sandy Strait are absolutely integral to the sand masses, both geographically and from a maintenance-of-integrity viewpoint. Imagine the Great Barrier Reef World Heritage Area without the islands!

Finally, it is very important for the boundary of the renomination to be the one Australia thinks is appropriate, and NOT the one we think would be accepted. Not to renominate at least the whole Great Sandy Region as originally nominated would be a betrayal of it.

### **Management of the Great Sandy Region: is it optimal?**

Having outlined the concept of world heritage areas, I want to turn briefly to management, asking, 'Is it a standard appropriate to the values and world heritage status?' or, put another way, 'Is full advantage being taken of this great resource?'

First, though, it is worthwhile examining what kind of stewardship the Queensland Government has applied over the last two decades to those areas which it believes are of world heritage value but which have still to be listed. This I believe is a worthwhile study project for someone, and I am not well-enough informed about resource use and planning in the area to say much. However, I am aware that finalisation of the declaration of the Great Sandy Region Marine Park has been delayed, and it did not give me much confidence to learn first hand that approval was given for a pilot scallop ranching proposal in Platypus Bay in the Hervey Bay Marine Park before public comments were called for. It is worth asking just how serious are the two governments about protecting their international assets in this region? The conservation movement needs to take a stronger watch over these potential world heritage areas.

Understandably, recreation and tourism have replaced commodity extraction as a major land use, and the management issue boils down to two main questions: 1) how well is the area being managed to protect and rehabilitate the natural values; and 2) how well is it being managed to take the greatest possible advantage of its values for recreation, education and research?

I had two main tools to help me with this: the 1994-2010 Plan of Management for the Great Sandy Region; and the Commonwealth Government's periodic report to the World Heritage Committee on the State of Conservation of Fraser Island, dated April 2003. In addition, in 1998/99, the Comprehensive Regional Assessment for the Regional Forest Agreement process and the Commonwealth Wilderness Program confirmed the existence of wilderness areas at both Fraser Island and Coloola. The maps of their boundaries are available.

Fraser Island was placed on the World Heritage List as being an outstanding example representing significant ongoing geological and biological processes and for its superlative natural features of exceptional natural beauty. In terms of the biota, the processes referred to are the natural processes of vegetation succession, including ongoing biological evolution. The primary management principle aim then should be, as the Minister's message in Foreword to the Plan of Management puts it, for the area to be - *a place where the evolutionary processes can continue unimpeded.*

Is this happening? It seems not. A draft fire strategy has been prepared but the Scientific Advisory Committee and the World Heritage Report have identified inappropriate fire regimes as a major

threat to the World Heritage attributes, interfering with vegetation succession and habitats. There appears to be confusion over what the role of the managers should be. There has been support for the idea of trying to emulate thousands-of-years-old Aboriginal fire patterns instead of allowing nature to take its course. Should the manager's role be that of guardian of natural processes or gardener? What nature can teach us will be restricted if it is the latter.

A major part of the guardianship role involves protecting the natural environment against recreation and visitation. The World Heritage Report identifies these as the other main threats to the world heritage values.

This raises the question of what should be the principle for the management of the land sections of the Great Sandy for recreation and education. Here again, the Minister's statement in the Plan of Management is pertinent. It states the aim as being for the Great Sandy to be a place where tourists – *can enjoy its splendour and tranquillity and return home without having marred their priceless inheritance*

As this statement clearly says, there can and must be a convergence in the twin aims of protection and provision for visitors. Generally speaking, what will most benefit the visitor is a situation in which they can have maximum contact with nature; in other words, one where there is the minimum number of manmade things to come between them and the natural environment. This in turn, sensibly done, offers the prospect of reduced visitor impact on nature.

This is a complex matter which requires the guidance of an overall strategy. What we do have is: studies on transport, sand road capacity, visitor site capacity; a camping management plan; and a monitoring project; but no overall strategy.

In the meantime, there are many adverse effects from the existing infrastructure (the very things which also insulate us from nature), including massive movement of sand by vehicle use and loss of canopy from roads. The widespread use of vehicles also drastically impacts on the chance to experience nature. The zoning plan provides for a remote zone over the northern part of the island, but the limited nature of the beach closure in the area limits its value for enjoyment of the wilderness. On Fraser Island, the four wheel drive is still king and the experience of tranquillity is often evasive. What role do commercial operators play in this?

Part of the answer lies in developing the type of visitor facilities that will enable the visitor to have a closer connection with the natural environment. One of these is walking tracks. That was why in 1976 John Sinclair and I proposed the Kgari Trail, to run from end to end on Fraser Island. In the remote section, of course, there need be no made track. The Plan of Management provides for a track from the Noosa North Shore to Dunbubara. Neither of these two projects have come about so far. What we do have is the 46 kilometre Cooloola Wilderness Trail and a recently made 90 kilometre Fraser Island Great Walk from Dilli Village to Lake Garawongera.

Finally, I have mentioned the potential of the World Heritage Area for education and environmental awareness-raising. There are a myriad of tools being used for this but, as far as I can see, they are not being orchestrated to take optimum advantage of what the World Heritage Area has to offer.

### **Conclusion: a 2020 vision**

I have tried to sketch out for you my vision for 2020: a much larger World Heritage Area; a less invasive approach to management of the natural environment; recreational activities which are less dependant on motor vehicles; and greater use of the Region for education. In 2020, in my vision: shanks pony is king; the Great Sandy Walk runs from Noosa to Sandy Cape and is one of a network of walking tracks.

We are nearly two-thirds of the way through the intended 16 year lifespan of the Plan of Management. Would it not be good if the deliberations at this conference led to the development of a new manifesto or grand plan to guide our efforts for the Great Sandy over the next 16 years? To that end, looking forward, I will conclude by spelling out the three main things I believe should happen in order to achieve the 2020 vision (but, in most cases, well before 2020) :

- 1) The first is very obvious. We have made a good start on getting the World Heritage Area established but we are only one fifth of the way there. **SO, FINISH THE JOB OF ESTABLISHING THE WORLD HERITAGE AREA TO ITS APPROPRIATE BOUNDARIES** and, as part of this, **MAKE SURE THAT THE EXTENDED AREA IS NOMINATED FOR ALL ITS WORLD HERITAGE VALUES.** The extension on the basis of the broader range of values would be a renomination. Similar studies to those made by the Scientific Advisory Committee for Fraser Island and Cooloola are needed. Their brief should include the examination of the close relationship between the different sub-regions;
- 2) In the meantime, **TREAT THE PROPOSED EXTENSION TO THE WORLD HERITAGE AREA AS THOUGH IT WERE ALREADY WORLD HERITAGE.** For instance, the marine areas should be out of bounds to damaging aquaculture projects; and
- 3) **CARRY OUT A POLICY AND STRATEGIC REVIEW OF THE GREAT SANDY REGION MANAGEMENT PLAN TO MAKE SURE THAT THE PROTECTION AND ENJOYMENT OF THE AREA'S NATURAL ENVIRONMENT ARE COMMENSURATE WITH ITS UNIVERSALLY OUTSTANDING VALUES.** In particular, the review should ascertain how to further reduce interference with natural environmental processes and evolution and, consistent with this, optimise the recreational and educational use of the natural environment. The focus should be on fire management, reducing vehicle use, creating a comprehensive system of walking tracks, improving camping arrangements and developing an overall interpretation strategy. Where there is any divergence from the optimal approach, such as any departure of fire management from the aim of a natural fire regime, the reasons for this need to be very clearly spelled out.

The Great Sandy Region is well and truly appreciated by many. That is what makes it all worthwhile. But there is a long way to go, and for those just joining the fight, I say: **SURPRISE US WITH YOUR IMAGINATION AND TENACITY.**

We badly need a new environmentally-based vision for a future world. The Great Sandy Region can help point us down that long track.