

DINGOES and FRASER ISLAND

The death of 9 year old Clinton Gage as a result of a dingo attack on Fraser Island on the morning of 30th April provoked a huge public discussion about dingoes and their behaviour and how it can be modified, about the management of Fraser Island and indeed about the role of the dingo in the an ecology. This backgrounder attempts to put all three of these main strands of the debate in context.

Dingoes — Part of the Australian ecosystem

About 5000 years before Portuguese navigators began exploring the east coast of Australia and Captain Cook claimed it for Britain. Asian seafarers had introduced the Asian wolf to Australia's northern shores. It became known as the "dingo".

As dingoes spread throughout mainland Australia they resulted in the extinction of a number of mammals the Thylacine (Tasmanian tiger) and Tasmanian devils. Because it never reached Tasmania these survived there. The ecological balance was changed and most believe that this change is now irreversible. Dingoes became the dominant predator of mainland. Over thousands of years the Australian ecology adjusted to their presence. They became a critical part of the Australian environment

Dingoes and Aborigines coexisted for at least 4000 to 5000 years with no apparent conflict. Doubtless dingoes fed off scraps of food provided by Aborigines, They were not seen as a threat to Aborigines. Feeding them did not result in them becoming aggressive.

Dingoes Posed No Threat to Aborigines

About the same time as dingoes arrived on the continent, Fraser Island was already cut off from the mainland and had its present shape and form. Because Great Sandy Strait was only a couple of kilometres in parts, dingoes had no difficulty in swimming across to take up residency on this island of 167,000 hectares. They survived with a population of up to 3000 Aborigines at times and in considerably greater numbers than they are in at present.

When Captain James Fraser and other survivors of the "Stirling Castle" shipwreck struggled ashore oil Fraser Island in 1836 and began their battle for survival, the dingoes did not rate even a mention. After Captain Fraser (for whom the island was named) died there, his widow Eliza returned to European civilization and earned much money telling and retelling of her harrowing ordeal, but dingoes were never a part of any of her stories.

From the earliest European settlement dingoes posed no threat to human life on Fraser Island. In 1975 I began a project which I still continue collecting oral and other history of the first part of the 20th Century on Fraser Island from people with long associations with it, including Aborigines. Nobody ever suggested that dingoes were a threat to human safety and most said dingoes on Fraser Island were lot more numerous in the past than they are now.

Rollo Petrie first went to Fraser Island in 1914 as a four year old. While he was growing up there over the next nine years four of his siblings were born there. In his autobiography Rollo recalled many dingo attacks on their family's domestic animals, but he never mentioned dingoes being any threat to any member of his family.

Anecdotal records from the 1930's still didn't mention any threats from dingoes on Fraser Island. Even in the late 1950s it was rare to get a good sighting of dingoes then even though they were constantly lurking nearby. They would hover around the camp, skulking near the cover of protective bush and rarely come within 20 metres. Nobody was threatened by dingoes although one had to keep a watchful eye behind one when fishing to ensure that a dingo did not run off with part of the catch left on the beach.

Before sandmining threatened the natural integrity of Fraser Island it was estimated that it drew only 5000 visitors. That was in 1970. In 1971 the controversy raging over sandmining caused the number of visitors to double. The number of visitors has increased exponentially since reaching 250,000 in 1992-93 and 330,000 last year.

Purity of Fraser Island Dingoes

Because of its isolation, Fraser Island dingoes largely escaped the impact of hybridization with domestic dogs which have tainted most of the rest Australia's dingo population. Indeed not only may Fraser Island dingoes have the purest dingo genes in Eastern Australia but they may be the purest form of Asian wolf in the world and this island population is one of the best chances to preserve that purity. To protect that very important gene pool domestic dogs have been banished from Fraser Island since 1981. The purity of the Fraser Island dingoes was one of the special values recognized in its World Heritage Listing in 1992. Thus Australia has an obligation to ensure that this genetic integrity is preserved.

New DNA research suggests that all dingoes came from one small group. University of NSW genetist, Dr. Alan Wilton, said, "*They are so closely related that they probably had the same maternal ancestor.*" says a at the.

After DNA testing of 2,000 samples across Australia by Dr. Wilton concludes that dingo gene pool is diminishing through interbreeding with domestic and feral dogs. However some populations such as in the Mt Kosciuszko region of the NSW- Victorian border and Fraser Island in Queensland, have relatively intact — between 70 and 80 percent of genetic material from animals is of the "pure" strain.

Fraser Island is so important to the survival of the dingoes is because its population can be isolated from other dogs preventing any further hybridization. Elsewhere once pure populations of dingoes are infiltrated with genes from domestic dogs.

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Scientists Disagree on the Dingoes

There are two reported views of the dingoes also reported in the same story. One view supported by most biologists, ecologists and conservationist claim *“The dingo has been here so long he deserves to be regarded as part of the evolutionary process”*.

However a minority of scientists lead by Queensland Museum’s Mammals Curator, Dr Steve van Dyke wants the dingoes removed from Australia. *“If they want to preserve the dingoes, they should send them back to Thailand where they came from. Many people don’t realize that Australia’s so called native dog isn’t a native at all.”*

Removing dingoes from the Australian ecosystem now will not restore many of the species that may have become extinct as a result of their introduction.

Dingoes Become a Threat

Throughout the 1970s and 1980s dingoes weren’t a threat to humans on Fraser Island, but during the 1990s dingo behaviour began to change dramatically.

Humans brought dingoes to Australia. Humans have always fed dingoes. What changed from the 1980s on Fraser Island was that instead of throwing scraps of food into the bush for dingoes to scavenge, tourists began enticing dingoes out of the bush to get their photographs. They held out the food so they could get close up photographs. As a result of this change in human approach, Fraser Island dingoes lost their wariness of humans. They became bold. Then they became brazen. They lost all fear of humans and some have now become aggressive towards humans with tragic consequences. Between 1995 and 2000 Fraser Island National Park rangers shot 40 dingoes because of their aggression towards humans.

As a result of the increasingly serious dingo attacks in 1998 the Queensland Government started to develop a Dingo Management Strategy to improve the interaction between humans and dingoes. This took much longer to produce than it should have because the Queensland Government failed to provide any funds Fraser Island natural resource management, including dingoes. In 1999 and 2000 Fraser Island was the only major Queensland National Park not to receive any consolidated revenue to facilitate its protection.

The tragedy of the fatal mauling of the 9 year old boy on 30 April has led to some outrageous reactions including the massacre of 30 dingoes. In 1999 it was estimated that in May –June the population of Fraser Island now consists of only about 100 animals. Shooting more than 30 dingoes in May 2001 reduced the gene pool to a dangerously low level, threatening one of Fraser Island’s World Heritage values.

Maintaining a Viable Gene Pool

The problem for the management of Fraser Island dingoes now is to ensure that a viable gene pool is maintained. The more genetic diversity amongst the population the stronger it will be. The diversity is threatened if the population continues to be culled because an animal is deemed a “threat”. FIDO believes that there should be an attempt to change dingo behaviour first and shooting is a last resort.



Fraser Island dingoes shouldn’t be needlessly massacred (or “culled” a euphemism which mean the same thing) in the interests of tourism. This makes the tragedy of the young boy’s death even more tragic. Fraser Island without dingoes would be like Yellowstone National Park without bears or Kruger National Park without lions or Kakadu without crocodiles. We don’t destroy all the cars on the road because some have been responsible for killing some humans. We don’t demand that all domestic dogs be destroyed because some kill humans. Why then should Fraser Island dingoes be massacred?

As part of the new Dingo Management Strategy the Queensland Government will have to provide more resources to Fraser Island, not just for managing the dingoes but also for managing tourists. It will have to start implementing the Tourist, Camping and Fire Management Plans all of which have languished for years. Free range camping needs to be phased out sooner rather than later. The epicentre of dingo attacks has been in the Orchid Beach-Waddy Point area. It has been exacerbated by dingoes being habituated by the urban residents of the area and the campers who have been allowed to remain at Waddy Point for 10 years in contravention of the Recreation Areas Management Act, as well as the annual Toyota Fishing Expo which has no proper place in this World Heritage site. Poor National Park staffing in the Waddy Point sub-district has also contributed to the problems.

The Dingo Risk Assessment which has resulted from the tragedy has shown that there is an abysmal ignorance on a number of key questions which must be addressed. Research needs to be done on dingoes and dingo behaviour. This can only be done effectively if every dingo Fraser Island is caught and identified with distinguishing mark. This will avoid the innocent dingoes being punished in future for the behaviour of others. Instead of dingoes being punished, those who feed them, who entice them closer to get photographs and to lose their fear of humans should be punished more severely.

Dingoes in the wild are a natural part of Fraser Island and part of its World Heritage values deserving much better management. To achieve that we must get dingoes to revert to the role they fitted into so comfortably for 5000 years until less than two decades ago. That involved coexisting with humans but being wary of them. Implementation of the long overdue Fraser Island Dingo Management Strategy will go a bug way towards ensuring that in future these wild animals keep their distance from humans.