

A History of Fraser Island (K'gari)'s World Heritage Recognition

By John Sinclair

Like many who grew up on the doorstep of Fraser Island (K'gari) I had nothing to compare this remarkable island with. Even in 1971 when FIDO was founded I didn't instantly recognize its uniqueness and outstanding value compared with other natural sites around the world. That realization only dawned through travel and research. Because so many locals failed to appreciate its value, they couldn't see why mining and forest industries shouldn't be allowed to prevail over protection. This set the scene for a protracted and sometimes bitter battle to get the island the recognition that it so justly deserves.

This FIDO Backgrounder No 82 (October 2017) celebrates the 25th Anniversary of Fraser Island's World Heritage inscription and how it came about.

In 1893 when the global movement to recognize outstanding natural sites as National Parks was still in its infancy and Australia still hadn't become a Federation, the Australian Association for the Advancement of Science, (the forerunner to ANZAAS) commissioned experts to identify what parts of Australia were most deserving of protection. The whole of Fraser Island was one of three sites recommended. Such was its obvious attraction. Sadly the recommendation was lost in the process of Federation. At the same time, the timber industry was consolidating its position on the island. This was to remain an impediment to the full protection of K'gari and its natural resources for the next 100 years.

The politics of Federation, two world wars and the Great Depression stalled the moves to preserve the whole of Fraser Island as a National Park. However it wasn't forgotten and when the voluntary conservation movement, like so many other non-profit lobbying groups became established throughout Australia in the 1960s attention again focussed on preserving the more significant components of the Australian landscape as National Parks.

Leading the charge to protect all aspects of the environment was the Australian Conservation Foundation (ACF). Following the creation of the World Heritage Convention which Australia was the first country in the world to ratify, in 1974, ACF proposed Fraser Island along with South West Tasmania, Kakadu and the Great Barrier Reef as its first four priority candidates for nomination for the World Heritage List. The Great Barrier Reef, Kakadu and South West Tasmania as priority areas to be given World Heritage Listing were listed in 1981-82 but opposition from Queensland's Bjelke-Petersen Government prevented Fraser Island's nomination being advanced.

In 1976 still before the World Heritage Convention was operational, the ACF expanded its list of sites meeting World Heritage criteria to fourteen (14). As part of the 1976 evaluation, the ACF added Cooloola and Great Sandy Strait to Fraser Island in an area then nominated as the Great Sandy Region. This process of selection involved an evaluation of all known major natural areas of Australia. The ACF recognized the Great Sandy Region's outstanding geomorphic, aesthetic and biological values as one of the greatest examples of sand, wind and fluctuating sea levels evolving a unique landscape unparalleled anywhere else in the world. The concept of the Great Sandy Region was accepted by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) that advises the World Heritage Committee in 1982. The IUCN listed the Great Sandy Region as one of the 221 natural sites in the world on its indicative World Heritage List. This was featured in a publication.

Fraser Island Sandmining Furore

When proposals for sandmining became public in 1971, Fraser Island (K'gari) became the centre of the largest environmental fight in Australia. Having plans to mine Cooloola for its rich mineral sands thwarted by organized public opposition, the Bjelke-Petersen government was determined not to allow anything to stand in the way of allowing sandmining to proceed on Fraser Island. This made the conservation campaign to protect K'gari from such an environmentally destructive industry much more difficult. Mining began on the island in December 1971. Conservationists though were determined to campaign against mining until it ceased and declared that every hectare of the island that could be saved was critical.

The election of the Whitlam Government at the end of 1972 introduced a policy that the Commonwealth would not allow new export licences for mineral sands without proper Environmental Impact Statements. There was a major political crisis in Canberra when the Whitlam Government tried to sidestep its way around this commitment. The result was the appointment of the Fraser Island Environmental Inquiry 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 following a week long inspection of the island. The hearings were conducted over 31 sitting days. They concluded on 3rd October, 1975. 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.

The inquiry itself was very controversial; it was boycotted by the Queensland Government and the Company that 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.

The Commissioners reported to the Minister for Environment under the new Fraser Government on 21 October 1976. Forty one years later Commissioner Hookey explained his strategy in delaying the delivery of the final report. The government swiftly accepted the inquiry's recommendations and acted promptly to implement 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. This made sandmining economically unviable and there has been no sandmining on Fraser Island since. Then Federal Environment Minister Newman advised the Commonwealth Parliament that the Commonwealth would pursue World Heritage Listing for Fraser Island. The whole of the island was registered on the National Estate on 13th September 1977.



The Politics of World Heritage Listing

By 1983, the Commonwealth Government had changed its position on World Heritage in great deference to states rights. It would only nominate sites for World Heritage listing that were supported by state governments. After being over-ruled by the Commonwealth on the Great Barrier Reef, Premier Bjelke-Petersen declared that *"not one more inch of Queensland would become World Heritage"* on his watch. It was a promise sustained for over a decade.

At the 1892 World Parks Congress in Bali, the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN the world's peak conservation organization that advises the World Heritage Committee on natural sites), had included the Great Sandy Region as one of the 221 natural sites in the world on its 1982 Indicative list for World Heritage listing. This was published in *"The World's Greatest Natural Properties"*. The supporting statement cited in the nomination indicates clear values that made the region's claims for recognition world class.

Support for listing gained momentum with two widely distributed coffee table publications, *"Australia's Natural Heritage"* published by the ACF in 1983 and in *"Australia's Wilderness Heritage"* published by Weldons in 1988.

A more comprehensive an assessment of the values of Fraser Island (K'gari) occurred in 1984 when the writer, John Sinclair and Leigh Hemmings co-authored the very first document formally nominating the Great Sandy Region for World Heritage listing. It was sent to every member of the Queensland Parliament but the Premier remained implacably opposed because he saw it as a threat to the timber industry and refused to accept any arguments that the potential economic value of an expanded tourist industry resulting from World Heritage far outweighed the value of

the timber industry. His views were reinforced by overstated values of the timber industry to Maryborough.

The Australian Heritage Commission responded advising the Fraser Island Defenders Organisation (FIDO) that:

"The two main questions to be answered are:

(i) whether the considerable values of (the region) satisfy the criteria for "outstanding universal value" as set down under the World Heritage Convention; and

(ii) if so whether the values of (the region) have been compromised by unsympathetic activities (sandmining and logging) to the extent that it might no longer qualify for World Heritage listing".

The Commonwealth Government never assessed the merits of the region to determine whether the ACF's 1984 nomination met the stringent criteria to qualify for a nomination. The Commonwealth also failed to formally advise the ACF or the authors of the report of its reaction to the values identified in the nomination.

In 1989, FIDO revised the 1984 nomination after being advised by Federal Environment Minister, Senator Richardson, that he would consider a fresh World Heritage nomination for the region if FIDO submitted one to him that he felt unequivocally satisfied the criteria. The revision was overtaken with the election in Queensland of a new State Goss Labor Government on 2 December, 1989 with a policy to *"create a Great Sandy Region National Park comprising Fraser Island and an expanded Cooloolool National Park --- (and recognize). the World Heritage value of the Great Sandy Region"*. The implications of this for the timber industry caused Goss to initially demur. However he resolved his misgivings by commissioning Tony Fitzgerald QC to examine the merits of the Great Sandy Region and to determine whether a World Heritage nomination should proceed for any or all of the region. Fitzgerald found that it did. On the basis of the Report of the Commission of Inquiry into the Conservation Management and the Use of Fraser Island and the Great Sandy Region (May, 1991) recommendations, both the Australian and Queensland Governments agreed to proceed with the nomination and this was prepared and submitted by December 1991

Although Cooloolool had been part of the nomination at the 16th session of the World Heritage Committee in Santa Fe, New Mexico in December 1992, only Fraser Island was inscribed. Significantly at the time *the Committee requested the Australian authorities to consider the addition of the aboriginal name of Fraser Island.*

