

# Major Influencers of Fraser Island Environmental Change

*There are three major factors influencing environmental change on Fraser Island: Fire, Ferals and Climate. These are the big three and part of the big picture which is being overlooked as many people are looking at lesser priorities without recognizing the long term consequences of neglecting these three critical issues. FIDO has already produced backgrounders on Fire and Ferals and is planning one on the potential impacts of climate change on the island. Environmental changes will inevitably result in the loss of biodiversity.*

## Prioritizing Fighting Ferals

Feral pests threaten Fraser Island's integrity by changing its whole ecology in a remarkably short time. The insidious, incremental spread of weeds on Fraser Island with each visit is disturbing, but the low priority assigned to dealing with ferals is infuriating. Ranger duties include sweeping, picking up litter and hazing dingoes, but overlook removing weeds, identifying the hives of feral bees, and preventing any new ferals reaching Fraser Island. Ironically, Rangers continue to turn a blind eye to weeds on a daily basis and yet use booming air-brooms to blow leaves off paths and pluck palm fronds out of Wanggoolba Creek for cosmetic effect.

Although the Great Sandy Region Management Plan addresses the issue of ferals adequately, the actions required have been poorly implemented. The consequences of failing to deal with ferals more actively are horrendous. Native species will be displaced by alien competitors. This applies to plants and animals. This is occurring slowly but inexorably already. Feral rodents are displacing natural rodents and marsupials; cane toads are displacing frogs. The habitat will change. Weeds will change open areas necessary for herbivores into areas of thick undergrowth. Bandicoot numbers are dwindling. Grasses are disappearing and so is the number of wallabies whose tracks were once regularly seen in the sandblows. Lantana and groundsel have established large, almost impenetrable areas but they are not the only villains. There is an increasing number of garden escapees spreading out of the developed township areas. These are hardy plants introduced to withstand the harsh conditions. That makes them even harder to eradicate.

While birds and native fauna do disperse some weeds particularly weeds with edible fruit including lantana, Easter cassia, umbrella trees, and pepperinas, weeds are being rapidly spread by both vehicles and people. Weeds are spreading without any concerted action to stop them.

The Department of Natural Resources and Minerals (DNRM) is supposed to be responsible for developing a weed strategy for Fraser Island, but it seems to be sitting on its hands. FIDO found it impossible to get any one from DNRM to join them for an inspection of the townships and FIDO hasn't heard from them since a Weeding Bee at Happy Valley with the NPAQ in April.

The QPWS is developing a Strategic Directions paper to identify its own priorities. While the contents of the paper are confidential, we can reveal that it paid scant attention to fighting ferals. The space and placement given to the small section on "Pest management" indicates the priority extends no further than glib lip service. A proposed Fraser Island Pest Management Strategy due for finalization in June 2004 has gone into the "completely overlooked" basket.

Quarantine: Not only is there almost total inaction to fight ferals already on Fraser Island, there has been no significant effort to enforce quarantine measures to stop further introductions. There are no signs at the barges and ferry terminals warning people about how weeds are spread and the risk that alien fauna could be hitch-hiking on their vehicles or in their equipment. If the integrity of a World Heritage property cannot be satisfactorily maintained, it can be taken off the World Heritage List.

## Managing the Fire Regime

Just as the ecology can be inexorably changed by the encroachment of weeds forming dense undergrowth, so the absence of fire can result in native species doing the same thing. To maximize the biodiversity on Fraser Island, FIDO believes that the objective must be to try to approximate the fire regime which was maintained on Fraser Island pre-European contact by traditional Aboriginal burning. FIDO therefore supports the idea of deliberate and strategic burning.

Unfortunately, attempts by the QPWS to replicate Aboriginal burning patterns so far have been an abysmal failure. The objective of achieving a 'Mosaic' pattern has been interpreted as having a few patches each thousands of hectares to make up the mosaic.

Instead of lighting fires in the late afternoon [which last only a few hours, normally self-extinguishing before midnight as heavy dew settles) and burning only a few hectares, the QPWS, using roads as fire control lines and areas encompassing thousands of hectares, ignites fires about 9.00 a.m. which may burn for days.

On Sunday 21<sup>st</sup> August while John Sinclair was leading a safari on Fraser Island, QPWS rangers started a "controlled burn" which had been planned for weeks. They had established pumps at Bogimbah Creek the previous day. However, despite the dry weather conditions and the fact that overnight the wind had changed from a mild south-easterly to a strengthening north-westerly, the fire went ahead as scheduled in appalling conditions. The mushroom shaped cloud which subsequently rose above the ignition area was testimony to the ferocity of the fire which then jumped control lines and burnt out of control for over a week. ***If anyone else had lit this fire they would have deserved to have been prosecuted.***

FIDO wants to see a more flexible and better considered approach to burning on Fraser Island. Scorched earth burning is not achieving any better outcome than no burning at all. FIDO wants the size of the patches burnt by any single fire to be reduced to less than 10 hectares rather than thousands of hectares. This can't be achieved by starting fires from the roadsides. It can be achieved by dropping incendiaries from the air. If this is done sparsely late in the afternoons it should go closer to achieving a desirable outcome on Fraser Island.



Since April 2004 Eli Creek's Mouth heads south