The cull of the wild

Dingoes, development and death in an Australian tourist location

ADRIAN PEACE
Adrian Peace is Reader in Anthropology at the University of Adelaide. His major research interests are community politics, environmental conflicts, and conceptions of place, space and landscape, which he pursues in Australia and in Ireland. His most recent ethnography is A world of fine differences: the social architecture of a modern Irish village, Dublin: University College Dublin Press, 2001. His email is adrian.peace@adelaide.edu.au

On the last day of April 2001, a nine-year-old boy was killed by two young dingoes on Fraser Island, a well-known tourist destination off the coast of southern Queensland. Clinton Gage and a seven-year-old friend were playing in dunes close to a small camping ground when the fatal assault took place. The same dingoes attacked the victim’s father and younger brother as they rushed from the campsite to assist him, but were then driven off. The boy’s death was a tragedy of such proportions that, throughout the following week, the circumstances were closely examined by the Australian media and in the society at large. On the island, the sense of shock and grief was overwhelming.

There was also immediate concern about the impact of this incident on Fraser Island’s multi-million-dollar tourist industry. This was reflected in the speed with which the state Premier moved to reassure all concerned that such a tragedy would not happen again. He instigated a major offensive – ‘a cull’ was the official term – against the island’s pure-bred dingo population, already considered rare and endangered by scientists of international repute. What was most striking about this response was that, in addition to the two dingoes identified as responsible for Clinton Gage’s death, a further 30 animals were killed by officers of the Queensland Parks and Wildlife Service (QPWS) within a month of the fatal attack. A quarter of the entire population of pure-bred animals was shot by the officials hitherto entrusted with their well-being; and in subsequent months, a further half dozen were put down.

This response certainly boosted the Queensland Premier’s cultivated image as a decisive political leader. It also reinforced his government’s unqualified commitment to the all-important and highly competitive tourist industry in the state. Fraser Island was, and remains, salutary in this species in both First and Third World contexts, for it is by no means unusual for their circumstances to fluctuate quite wildly. There are many instances on record in which animals are at one point in time considered worthy of protection and care, whilst at another they are dispatched with some alacrity (Kaufman and Mallory 1993); the dingoes of
tion, it was able to do so with some degree of local support. I suggest that this was because of recent cultural developments specific to Fraser Island in which the dingoes’ persistent crossing of significant boundaries between animals and people resulted in their being considered distinctly disposable, in contrast to their previously protected status.

The pristine island and the pure-bred dingo

During the 1970s, Fraser Island was a major site of political struggle between groups determined to continue exploitation of its natural resources to the hilt, in particular sand mining companies backed by the state government, and conservation associations resolutely opposed to this prospect, notably the Fraser Island Defence Organization (FIDO) (Bonyhady 1993, Sinclair 1994). Following a commission of inquiry which examined the island’s resources and the impact of capitalist development over several decades (Queensland Government 1991), the extraction of natural resources was brought to a halt. Subsequently the island was listed as a World Heritage site, in significant part because of its flora and fauna, including the pure-bred dingoes. During the 1990s, Fraser Island emerged as a major centre for domestic and international tourism, generating a corresponding increase in the scale of holiday accommodation and entertainment facilities.

The result of this recent history is that Fraser Island is the object of multiple interpretations and multiple representations. Government agencies, conservation groups, the QPWS, Aboriginal representatives and tourist companies all have some stake which they articulate in different ways. Some of these differences will surface in what follows, but the first point to establish is that the most pervasive representations emanate from commercial and government organizations whose shared goal is to market the island as an outstanding holiday destination.

The paramount metaphor which informs this commodification of Fraser Island is that of a jewel of nature. The place is commercially constituted as a wilderness paradise scarce touched by human settlement. The island’s geological distinctiveness is integral to this metaphoric elaboration. It is composed entirely of sand carried by the rivers of the Great Divide into the South Pacific, then swept northwards by powerful winds and sea currents. Also distinctive are the island’s perched lakes, which are formed by wind-created hollows in the sand, in which debris accumulates and cements with sand grains; these basins fill with rainwater to make crystal-clear lakes. These formations, as well as the coastal topography, are constantly changing, a feature which is incorporated into the rhetoric of Fraser Island as an authentic wilderness which changes unpredictably through the action of natural forces rather than human intervention.

In fact the impact of farming, forestry and mining on this wilderness has been comprehensively charted by such bodies as the QPWS (which is wholly committed to government policy on the expansion of mass tourism) and conservation groups, especially FIDO (which is highly critical of that policy and the groups which endorse it). On the other hand, because earlier economic development involved the direct extraction of raw materials with no processing on site, there are no significant residential settlements, industrial sites or permanent roads forming indelible scars the landscape. It is possible for those promoting tourist expansion to elaborate the image of the island as an untouched paradise.

Private entrepreneurial enterprises and state development companies marshal all available resources to fetishize this coastal space. Their commercial discourse is replete with such terms as ‘wild’, ‘ancient’, ‘idyllic’ and ‘mysterious’. Publicity videos and still photographs for magazines, brochures and posters skilfully erase evidence of past exploitation. But in addition to being represented as pristine, Fraser Island is portrayed as a safe place. It is not presented as a challenging or dangerous landscape, but rather as welcoming and benign, a safe haven where creature comforts are always to hand for the well-heeled tourists from overseas this publicity aims to attract, whilst immediately beyond the vacation resort, a harmonious, peaceful nature is likewise accessible. Fraser Island’s fauna have been relentlessly recruited to this artfully composed construct: their images are rendered consistent with representations of the natural environment. This applies above all to the dingo, which is amongst the largest animals inhabiting the island. Most of the larger animals stereotypically associated with the Australian continent are absent: there are no kangaroos, koalas or emus here. But in addition to being substantial in size, the dingo
Dingoes are the subject of contradictory images, on the one hand to be feared as wild animals according to the Department of the Environment (top), on the other the target of fun and ridicule in tourist resort advertising (below).

1. My use of the term "transgressive" is broadly similar to that of Philo who, following Creswell (1996), wrote: "Many animals (domesticated and wild) are on occasion transgressive of the socio-cultural order which is created and policed around them by human beings, becoming "matter out of place" in the process; it is in this respect that animals often squeeze out of the places - or out of the roles that they are supposed to play in certain places - which human beings envisage for them." (1998: 52)

2. Anthropomorphism is, however, commonplace where animals on Fraser Island are concerned, especially on whale watching tours. For details, see Peace (forthcoming 2003).

3. This is similar to the situation with cougars described by Gullo et al.: "...negative terms for cougars, such as "serial killers", tended to be graphic and alarmist, evoking images of cougars as vicious killers set out to inflict pain and death on people. Such images, linking cougars with premeditated crimes and murder, played on popular worries about rising crime and lawlessness." (1998: 153)

4. A similar point is made by Whitemore and Thorne (1998). Following Kaufman and Mallory (1992), they conclude: "The designation "wild" seems not to have served its animal inhabitants well, figuring them as the currency of various human desires, whose value varies with distance. Even as they are caught up in the annexation of global regulatory networks designed to "protect" them, they find themselves objectified again in the business of "wildlife management". (1998: 451)


holds particular value in terms of representation because of its ambiguous appearance, somewhere between wild animal on the one hand and domesticated creature on the other. The dingo can be made to appear wild but familiar. Two additional features are important. First, much is made of the fact that these are pure-bred creatures. Thanks to an ecological niche which has kept them relatively free from interbreeding with domestic and wild dogs, scientific opinion has it that these dingoes are purer than any other in the region (Woodall et al. 1993, Woodall et al. 1996). This genetic make up is, of course, integral to their need to be protected. More importantly for the purposes of the present discussion, whether it is in advertising material put out by tour operators or information leaflets published by the QFWS, the pure-bred quality of the dingo is made to resonate with the notion of this being a pristine and wild environment.

Second, symbolic constellations of the dingo are made consistent with representations of the island as a safe place. The dingo is almost invariably depicted as a lone animal, a solitary creature which is itself vulnerable (as befits a rare species) and non-threatening (as suits this island paradise). The dingo is never depicted as a carnivorous animal moving around the island in small groups. Instead, on a postcard a single dingo pads across the pure sand: in a poster the sole dingo sits alert in the dunes; on video a dingo on its own skips lightly away into the rainforest. Not only is this an animal which is at home in the pure sand near to the clear ocean; it is also a solitary creature which knows its place in nature.

Be Dingo-Smart!

How to be Dingo-Smart?
- Stay clear of children.
- Walk in small groups.
- Watch dingoes quietly, don't provoke them.
- Look out for dingoes. They can run.
- NEVER feed dingoes.
- Lock up your food stores.
- Wake more than your head up.
- Keep fish and all the ground.
- Make sure not handling dingoes, use your belongings, use.
- Tell others how to be Dingo-Smart!

From island icon to demon dingo

These idealized images of animal and habitat continue to play their part in the ceaseless commodification of Fraser Island. But recent developments have generated another discourse altogether. Conservationists, scientists, and especially knowledgeable locals have been variously involved in reconstituting the dingo's image from a striking icon of benign nature into an unnatural demonic creature, a cultural transformation much facilitated by occasional interventions by media from the mainland.

The origins of this contrasting construct lie in a series of minor transgressive acts in which some dingoes displayed growing indifference to the specific places in the wilderness allocated to them by idealized representations (Peace 2001). By the mid-1990s, they had become a regular presence in the hallowed spaces of modern tourism - campsite barbecue areas, car parks at the perched lakes, beaches where sunbathers congregated, swimming pools and open air restaurants at the main resorts. This made them accessible as photographic subjects, and therefore most welcome to many tourists; but their popularity was more than offset over time by their taking food from restaurant tables, forcing entry into expensive tents, chewing up costly hiking boots, defecating around swimming pools, and running off with bathers' clothing.

Most significant, there was an increasing number of incidents involving dingoes and tourists which were reported to different agencies on the island and then incorporated into reports drawn up
by PQWS officials, who are at all times responsible for such developments. Tourist well-being is closely monitored in this context, and complaints are taken seriously by all concerned, so hotel staff, resort rangers, tourist operators and private citizens reported such incidents to the PQWS. Respectively, the PQWS was widely criticized for not being this information to public attention. However, there is little doubt that these accumulating details were treated discreetly, and certainly some involved in the tourist business would have preferred that information of this type did not enter into wider circulation.

But when significant incidents occurred, the information could not be concealed; it spread fast across the island, and some details were picked up by the media. The most important event occurred in April 1998 when an infant was bitten at a campsite, an incident which generated substantial media coverage because of its similarity to the notorious Azaria Chamberlain case at Ayers Rock in 1978 (more of which shortly). In the next few days, a considerable amount of additional information about tourists’ difficulties with dingoes was lodged with the PQWS.

It was, however, prominent scientists and conservationists (often the distinction between them is unclear in this setting) who put analytical flesh on this accumulating body of knowledge. When approached by the media, several recognized authorities on island wildlife argued that the prime threat to the pure-bred dingo was no longer that of interbreeding with domestic or wild dogs. The dingo population had become more and more reliant on food consumed from the human table, and this meant they were becoming, as one radio commentator put it, ‘less and less wild’. Consuming food from human sources was by no means unknown in the past: waste products from fishing have long been part of the dingo diet. But now, scientists and conservationists argued, their dependence was so substantial that dingoes were losing their natural instincts to hunt in the wild. The population was developing unnaturally because weaker animals could survive on tourist scraps (in earlier times they would have starved or been killed by healthy animals). The age-old hierarchy of control was breaking down since young males were no longer dependent on older animals for the transmission of hunting skills and assistance through lean times. Above all, dingoes had lost the sense of fear which had always kept them at a distance from human beings. The result was a wholly unnatural reliance on people which, when emboldened animals became hungry and frustrated, led them to attack vulnerable human beings.

In brief, scientific opinion was that the dingoes had moved from their customary and demanding wilderness habitat into a bestowed world of fast food consumption, and they were corrupted by it. This interpretation from mainland sources was already considered common sense amongst some prominent, long-term island residents, ensuring that this line of argument became established as received opinion about ‘the dingo problem’. As the two interpretations became fused, however, the discourse developed distinctly negative anthropomorphic strains which laid the basis for the dingoes’ eventual demonization. It was assumed, for example, that food and fat from the barbecue plate would be far more appealing than anything, available in the wild, and this is what made the dingoes ‘lazy’, ‘overfed’, and ‘complacent’. It was taken for granted that ‘begging’ and ‘scavenging’ around campfires was ‘far preferable’ to hunting in the wild. It was seen as self-evident that the natural hierarchy was ‘breaking down’ as ‘young rogues lost fear’ and displayed ‘no respect for older animals’. On all sides, there was evidence that dingoes were now driven by ‘frenzied’, ‘reckless’, ‘anger’, and ‘a growing degree of confidence’ to ‘nip’, ‘bite’ and otherwise ‘assault’ people who refused them food. Finally, the idea that nature was no longer taking its proper course was summarized in the judgment of several prominent residents and scientists that the dingo had become ‘a mortal danger’ to humans. It was only a matter of time, opinion had it, before something far more serious occurred.

‘A death in paradise’

Given these developments, when Clinton Gage was killed at the end of April 2001 a substantially authorized framework of interpretation was in place to make sense of the tragedy. It revolved around the belief that aberrant behaviour had taken root within the dingo population as a whole. It was not behaviour specific to the two young dingoes which was responsible. The tragedy could be put down to a substantial and growing percentage of pure-bred animals having become aberrant in their socialization, their organization and their conduct. Their situation also seemed irredeemable. Consensus was that once dingoes had crossed the boundary between the wilderness of which they were properly a part and the consumer world to which they were now improperly attached, the process could not be reversed.

The central issue here is not whether the dingoes had become increasingly dangerous to people on Fraser Island. It is a matter of how the dingoes were discursively constituted in ways distinct from their previous status, and how a particular logic emergent from these interpretive emphases led to the conclusion that a substantial percentage had to be shot. It will be clearly evident by this stage that a number of culturally arbitrary assumptions – if not, indeed, outright misrecognitions – were at work. Consider, for example, the authenticity of the island wilderness, the natural place of the dingo in the island’s wild places, the processes of natural hierarchy within the animal population, and what unassailable forms the behaviour of dingoes should take.

In the rising crescendo of moral panic which demonized the dingoes, however, there was little room for those involved to query these assumptions. To the contrary, further developments sealed the fate of these dingoes considered by PQWS officers to be invertebrate transgressors. At this stage in particular, the influence of the media, already fully focused on the island by the death of the young boy, became significant.

First, media coverage of the fatal attack involved a redefinition of Fraser Island as a distinct place. The dark side of paradise is a recurrent theme in many strands of Western culture. It figures above all in folk culture, whilst probably the best known 20th-century examples are found in literature (The Island of Dr Moreau, Lord of the Flies) and in film (Jurrasic Park, The Beach). The dark side is indelibly associated with animals and animalism, and it was this mythical association that print and electronic media played on to highlight the unspeakable horror of the attack on Clinton Gage. Commercial television channels showed few scruples in relying on skilful camera work at dusk and in secluded locations to capture the sense of horror and fear now firmly associated with the dingoes and their island home.

Second, the death of Clinton Gage and the disappearance of Azaria Chamberlain became indissolubly linked to reinforce the idea of the Australian dingo as an animal which had the ability to kill people. In this infamous case (Marcus 1989), by now just two decades old, Lindy Chamberlain claimed that her infant daughter had been taken by a dingo from the family’s tent at Ayers Rock but was imprisoned for the murder of her child, only to be released after two and a half years and paid $1.3 million for wrongful conviction. Yet it had never been categorically established that a
The death of a nine-year-old boy has tragically laid the dingo question to rest.

These dogs do kill children

In Australia’s leading broadsheet, The Australian, it is established that all dingoes share the capacity to kill children, while in a popular magazine (Who Weekly) the island is redefined as having a ‘dark side’.

Finally, to further embellish this demonizing language, the media seized on additional remarks by scientists and conservationists interviewed in the wake of the tragedy. Particularly widely quoted was the head of Queensland’s Wildlife Preservation Society, one of the more influential of the state’s several score conservation groups. Under the headline ‘Tourists create “super dingoes”’, the director was quoted as follows:

The dingoes which killed a boy on Fraser Island yesterday are part of a growing ‘super’ pack feeding off scraps from tourists, according to a leading conservationist.

Because of the conditions on the island they have become “super packs”, said Wildlife Preservation Society of Queensland director Jan Oliver.

‘The human influence on the dingoes has created a very different environment and breeding pattern for dingoes so that now we get bigger packs.’ (The Advertiser, 1 May 2001)

Third, on the basis of this apparent confirmation, the media seized every opportunity to reinforce the belief that on Fraser Island specifically the dingoes’ capacity to kill people was not restricted to one or two powerful animals. In the days immediately following the tragedy, wherever a photograph of a dingo from the island was printed, negative labels were readily attached to it. In the Murdoch stable of newspapers, one repeatedly used photograph of a young snarling dingo was given the heading of ‘Natural born killer’. Such images were matched by texts creating the impression that vicious, cunning dingoes were numerous and that the only answer was to put them down.

On 1 May, for example, the prominent tabloid Herald-Sun devoted its front page to ‘DINGO KILLS – Boy, 9, dies and brother mauled – Holiday island’s wild dogs (sic) attack.’ On an inside page, an article headed ‘DEADLY STALKERS’ cited six attacks between 1980 and 1999 on either people or their pets. The main article described how a woman and her infant had been ‘stalked’ until rescued by a resident who had used his 4WD to force the dingo away. A local store owner argued ‘they should shoot them all…’, whilst a local developer explained how dingoes ‘will test you, nip at your heels, see if they can take you… as soon as you’re down, they go in for the kill.’

The very notion of a ‘super pack’ is a headline writer’s gift, and newspaper and television programme editors extracted maximum advantage from it and similar ‘scientifically-informed’ comment. Far from being lone, solitary creatures which fled from contact with humans, the dingoes were now widely depicted as organized into large groups to make sustained incursions into the spaces occupied by residents and holiday makers. Instead of keeping to the wilderness, packs of dingoes were described as incessantly traversing the boundary between humans and animals. To effectively convey the significance of all this, the telling metaphor which took hold was that of the typical island dingo as criminal and hoodlum. At the least, the dingo now behaved like ‘a ruffian’, ‘a thug’, or ‘a gangster’, whilst in worst guise he was (as we have already seen) ‘a natural born killer’. These ‘rogue’ creatures were claimed to routinely ‘thieve’, ‘raid’, ‘terrorize’, ‘stalk’, ‘attack’, ‘bring down’, and ‘assault’ in their encounters with humans. In this discourse, a theme of rampant malevolence simultaneously highlighted and constituted the extent to which these ‘dogs’ and wild dogs – as they were increasingly described – had become an incontrovertible threat to society. Far from being a highly valorized icon, in the discourse emergent from the trauma of Clinton Gage’s death, the dingo was no more than ‘vicious vermin’.

The politics of animal enclosure

The argument is, then, that to explain the Queensland government’s uncompromising action against the endangered dingoes, and why this was considered a legitimate response by a certain proportion of the population at large,
In the immediate wake of the island tragedy, the dingo is demonized as a ‘natural-born killer’, all the more destructive as a description juxtaposed with the innocence and vulnerability of the child.

It is essential to acknowledge local cultural developments in the understanding of animal-human relations. The gruesome killing of Clinton Gage created a situation in which extreme measures – unthinkable, arguably, under more normal circumstances – were considered justified. I have argued, however, that the situation was considerably more involved than that. In the couple of years prior to this tragic incident, cultural conceptions of dingo behaviour on Fraser Island had shifted markedly and decisively away from the dingo as the embodiment of nature to one in which the animal was seen as unnaturally. A substantial number could therefore be sacrificed without undue concern in order to preserve the interests of the lucrative regional tourist industry.

This argument is obviously specific to a particular time and place. But I suggest by way of conclusion that the events described above, and others which followed in their wake in 2001 and 2002, are consistent with more general processes underpinning animal-human relations in contemporary society, especially the process of enclosure as described by a number of social analysts ranging from Berger (1989) through to Watts (2000), who sums up his perspective as follows: ‘To put the matter starkly, one might say that the relation between animals and modernity can be construed as a gigantic act of enclosure – necessitating, of course, loss and displacement...’ (2000: 293).

Having put down one quarter of the dingo population, the Queensland government was faced with the question of what to do with those which remained. Clearly, if – as was by now categorically assumed – the core problem was extensive interaction with people which had corrupted the dingoes, the major requirement was to put an end to these insidious relations as soon as possible. To this end, the draft of a previously-commissioned report on the management of the island (which had languished for several months on the relevant minister’s desk) became the focus of intense exchange between politicians, public servants and various experts. Further specialist advice from scientists was then commissioned in order to provide an up-to-date assessment of the risks posed by the remaining dingoes. Finally, in late June 2001, a report was tabled in the state parliament with a series of recommendations aimed at reforming animal-human relations on the island.

There was no attempt in this political manoeuvring to assess the historical course of economic development on Fraser Island, still less the ways in which dominant economic interests produced multiple images and narratives which misrepresented and misrecognized the island and its animal population, both historically and contemporaneously. Putting ‘the dingo problem’ to rest was quite simply a management exercise, and with this in mind, a series of recommendations was offered, aimed at educating the tourists about dingoes and, if necessary, penalizing inappropriate behaviour. Essentially, on arrival at the island tourists would run into a blitz of publicity proclaiming, in the words of one leaflet, that ‘Dingoes have become threatening’, and urging them not to encourage the animals’ untoward behaviour. On-the-spot fines were recommended, more substantial ones for tourist operators who encouraged inappropriate conduct amongst their clients.

As for the dingoes, their behaviour was to be changed by a new regime of physical coercion. QPWS officers were to be provided with slingshots, high-frequency sound devices, irritant sprays and stock whips. As a last resort, dingoes which persisted in transgressing would be shot, but not before other efforts had been made to force the dingoes away from populated areas into more customary habitats where they would regain the ability to hunt, survive, and reproduce a healthy pure-bred stock. Further measures included laying bait to make the dingoes sick, and using high fences to exclude them from some tourist sites.

Subsequent to all this, however, undoubtedly the most revealing proposal – which came from within the ranks of the local community – was that of a mammoth enclosure, an expanse of several thousand hectares at the heart of the island in which all remaining dingoes would be concentrated. Within this enclave, marked out from the surrounding landscape by a high wire fence, visitors would be able to promenade along protected pathways and spend time in an interpretative centre. In the words of one, fully supportive, academic expert in animal behaviour: ‘It would be artificial, but people would be safe, people could look at them, and enjoy Fraser Island without the problem of being stalked by a dingo.’ (The Australian 25 April, 2002)

At the time of writing, whilst all the other reforms have been implemented across the island, the proposal to build a physical enclosure seems unlikely to materialize: the huge cost alone would be prohibitive. But in a very real sense, this is of limited significance because the process of enclosure on Fraser Island has already taken on comprehensive proportions where the dingo population is concerned. The dingoes are now fully circumscribed by an official mindset which demands they retreat to specified wilderness areas: they are currently the target of a panoptic regime which dictates that they exhibit and adhere to certain behaviours and not others; they are already subject to a punitive system of surveillance and control which demands that specific kinds of boundary between themselves and people be strictly maintained. A final act of physical enclosure would be no more than that – the physical inscription on the island landscape of ways of thinking about dingoes which reveal not so much a genuinely humane concern for them as a profound degree of alienation from them.