

DISCUSSION BY Dr. IAN GUNN

Death of the Dingo on Fraser Island

2011

Queensland World Heritage listed Fraser Island, that environmental icon and a major tourist destination is also home to a unique population of native Australian dingoes. These dingoes were an important component of the UNESCO's listing of the island as a World Heritage site in 1992 and are a tourist highlight.

The World Heritage listing Convention includes the protection, conservation, presentation and transmission to future generations of the natural heritage, fauna and flora.

However, the island's dingo population is currently doomed to extinction within the next 10-20 years. It is racing towards catastrophic collapse with unforeseen consequences for other native species on the Island.

Why is the Fraser Island dingo so important? Due to Fraser Island's isolation, its dingoes have been largely protected from interbreeding, or hybridization with domestic dogs. Elsewhere in Australia, hybridization is widespread. Also, recent research from across Australia has shown the ecological value of the dingo as a top predator.

Ironically, after World Heritage listing the tourist potential of Fraser Island became apparent and the flora and fauna became expendable, which sealed the death warrant for the Fraser Island dingo. Due to its isolation (166,000ha), limited habitat and resources (in particular food), a non-viable population size, and to a restrictive, misguided Queensland Parks and Wildlife Service (QPWS) Dingo Management Strategy, the dingo is likely to become another statistic in Australia's long list of mammal extinction.

Prior to European settlement, the dingo lived as an integral part of the lifestyle of the indigenous community on Fraser Island. This balance collapsed with the establishment of a timber industry, which has now been replaced by relentless, ever-expanding tourist traffic.

The remaining population of dingoes on the island is insufficient to remain viable and healthy. Population figures released by QPWS record current numbers at between 100 and 200, with 25 to 30 packs (averaging 6-8 per pack). Even if this number is accurate, or even if the numbers are doubled, they fall well below accepted scientific criteria for a minimum viable population.

It is irrefutable that small populations are particularly vulnerable to extinction. The reduced gene pool on the island results in a loss of genetic diversity along with a genetic bottleneck. This reduces their ability to evolve and cope with environmental changes or shocks and leads to a reduction in their reproductive performance (increased infertility and low survival rates of litters). Further, as is now evident, their breeding age, death rates and sex ratio are being adversely affected.

In conjunction with these genetic pressures, Fraser Island dingoes are subjected to unwarranted culling or destruction of suspected problem dingoes, regular harassment (hazing) of dingo's encroaching on to tourist beaches or around resorts, annual trapping and tagging of juveniles and ethically questionable 'research', including electric shock behaviour-change experimentation. These strategies are seemingly at odds with the governments principle of regarding dingoes as "wild native animals" and "interfering" with them as little as possible."

There is also a severe lack of natural food resources, this is highlighted in the postmortem reports of 90 dingoes that died or were culled on the island. Stomach examinations showed that 37% were surviving on vegetable matter, 30% on fish, 23% with rubbish (plastic bags, foil, meat packaging pads), and 10% had empty stomachs. Only 12% contained any mammals or reptiles.

Yes, the island has the potential to maintain a resident population but not , on it's own, a viable healthy sustainable population that has a long term future.

The current QPWS's Dingo Management Strategy must be re- evaluated and reviewed on scientific, ethical and welfare considerations to ensure that the Fraser Island dingo survives. The current strategy acually contributes to the demise of the dingo.

If , this is not addressed immediately then we will witness the death of Fraser Island dingo's and the loss of an important population of national and international importance.

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