

REVIEW OF THE FRASER ISLAND DINGO MANAGEMENT STRATEGY.

Submitted by

Save Fraser Island Dingoes Inc.

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Save Fraser Island Dingoes Inc. is a non for profit organisation formed in 2009 in response to numerous concerns by visitors and the local community regarding the well being and treatment of the Fraser Island dingo.

SFID has been collecting eye witness and written reports from the public, collating research papers and, through Right to Information, analysing necropsy, incident reports and tag registers. SFID continues to liaise with scientists and dingo/wildlife experts. This information has enabled SFID to provide an informed and comprehensive history of the dingo on Fraser Island, and report and make recommendations regarding the current unsustainable situation that now exists on the Island.

Constant lobbying has forced the Labor government into a more transparent and accountable position, this has brought to light the inadequacies of current management practices and the urgent need for a complete, independent review.

The Committee is comprised of members from a diverse background of professions and expertise.

Committee Members:

President: Malcom Kilpatrick. Business owner in Engineering design and Tourism Industry. Conservationist.

Vice-President: Jennifer Parkhurst. Wildlife Photographer, studied the FI Dingo for 7 years. Author: 'Vanishing Icon. The Fraser Island Dingo.'

Secretary/Treasurer: Karin Kilpatrick. Business Owner. Tourist Operator. Conservationist.

Publicity Officer: Cheryl Bryant. Zookeeper. Animal Behaviourist. Wildlife Carer. Tour Guide.

Wildlife Adviser: Ray Revill. Ex Fraser Island ranger. Curator, Maryborough Wildlife Sanctuary

Indigenous Advisor: Aunty Marie Wilkinson, Butchulla Elder. Ex member (CAC)

Assistant Secretary: Norma Hannant. Business/Tourist Operator on Fraser Island for 37 years. Ex member, Community Advisory Committee. (CAC.)

Legal Adviser: Marilyn Nuske. Solicitor, Wildlife Advocate.

Assist. Legal Adviser: Trevor Passey. JP. Legal Administrator, Hervey Bay Courthouse.

Social Director: Sonia Hutchinson. Local Farmer, frequent visitor to Fraser Island for 35years. Wildlife Carer.

Events Coordinator: Robert Heathcote. Property Manager. Animal Activist.

Assist. Events Cordinator: Michael Steffert. Marketing Manager. Conservationist.

SUBMISSION : A REVIEW OF THE FRASER ISLAND DINGO MANAGEMENT STRATEGY.

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INTRODUCTION.

Fraser Island is an important part of Australia's cultural and natural heritage. The Fraser Island dingo has been an integral part of this environment and lived with the indigenous Butchulla people for thousands of years, long before European settlement. It is considered one of the last pure strains of dingo remaining on the Eastern Coast.

The conservation of this gene pool is of National and International significance, but their survival has been compromised by a government strategy to modify natural dingo behaviour, restrict access to territory and destroy animals.. This has created an unnatural and unstable environment.

The dingo is the keystone predator protecting biodiversity, therefore management decisions must focus on recovering and maintaining a viable and stable population. The social stability of the dingo family group must be re-established and, in turn, this will restore biodiversity to the ecosystem.

BACKGROUND.

The Fraser Island dingo lived in proximity to humans throughout its existence. It was once the camp dog of the Indigenous People and slept under the verandah of residents, was wormed and cared for by rangers/forestry workers, and was not considered an animal to be feared, but respected.

*'Dingoes before World Heritage listing were seldom seen in the daytime. Only in the morning and late afternoon at low tide catching fish in the shallow water holes or scavenging on the beach. They were very shy animals'...*Norma Hannant. Island resident.

In 1991 almost all of Fraser Island was declared a National Park. The Queensland Parks and Wildlife Service took over the management of Fraser Island from the Forestry. All non-indigenous species were culled or removed, dumps were closed, fishers and locals were no longer permitted to leave scraps for the animals. Dump closures were blamed for starvation (Price1994) The first ever recorded case of harassment of campers for food occurred in 1990.[1]

Dingoes were killed in the name of 'maintaining a stable population' and eliminating 'problem animals'. QPWS shot the harmless and easily found animals that were being fed by residents and resort staff. It is estimated that approximately 50 animals were culled between 1994-95. Dingo packs were fractured causing atypical behaviour and the animals were still starving, inevitably, the harassment of campers continued.

In 1997 the QPWS produced their Draft Fraser Island Dingo Management Strategy. **It recommended using electric cattle prods, non lethal poison (Lithium Chloride) baits to discourage the dingoes from eating human food, throwing fireworks at them, using bull-whips, shooting the dingoes with clay/marble pellets, and more killing.** [1] The culling and interference of the dingo population has continued, resulting in the problems that exist today.

The Island was World Heritage Listed in 1992 and is currently managed under several Legislative Acts, including the Qld. Nature Conservation Act 1992. Section 17 states “*A national park is to be managed to provide to the greatest possible extent, for the permanent preservation of the area’s natural condition and the protection of the area’s cultural resources and values*”. **The dingo is classified as native wildlife under this legislation and therefore should be considered as a protected species on World Heritage Listed Fraser Island.**

DISCUSSION: FRASER ISLAND DINGO MANAGEMENT STRATEGY. (FIDMS)

The finalised Fraser Island Dingo Management Strategy (FIDMS) was released in November 2001 (EPA 2001b) It was formulated based on information supplied by QPWS staff, including a report by Dr. Laurie Corbett, a consultant employed by the government, and recommendations by the EPA. A review was released in 2006. (EPA 2006) Neither document has been independently peer reviewed.

An audit of the FIDMS was conducted in Oct. 2003 and in Aug. 2009, again by Dr. Laurie Corbett, who participated in the original research, therefore this report would not be accepted by the academic community as a valid peer review. The findings were based on incomplete and unpublished data.

A Population Study (Interim Report Stage 1) was released July 2010 but failed to address crucial issues, such as the status of the current genetic make up of the population and, most importantly, the *effective breeding* population.

Only a small proportion of the population, which are the alpha pairs and, in good years, some subordinate dogs, will produce the next generation. This means, genetically, there would be a much smaller “effective” population. Franklin (1980) has suggested that, simply to maintain short term fitness, the minimum effective (breeders) population size (in genetic terms) should be around 50. Soule (1980) --- long term evolutionary potential may well require a number of substantially larger populations.

The current satellite tracking research program will not determine the number of breeding pairs and therefore will not determine if there is a sustainable and viable population.

With only a small effective population, the natural gene pool would be eroded. *If there was an unacceptable risk with these estimated numbers, then it would be logical to develop a breeding program of captive Fraser Island dingoes in wildlife parks/sanctuaries, and a long term storage of Fraser Island dingo sperm or embryos to preserve the genetic make up of the population.* Dr. Luke Leung University of Qld.

The FIDMS is based on the premise that the dingo is to be feared as “dangerous and aggressive” and all interaction with humans are negative and to be avoided, but interactions have occurred between people and dingoes for thousands of years. *The strategies for eradicating negative interactions also limit positive interactions, which are part of the essential nature of wildlife tourism.* [2]

The FIDMS then goes on to suggest that the dingo has become threatening as opposed to being naturally threatening, this is in contradiction to the previous statement.

Whilst the FIDMS suggest a number of reasons for dingo aggression including, feeding, defending territory, regarding small children as prey and simply playing with people, it omits evidence that most encounters are provoked by visitors.

The whole emphasis of the strategy is based on the assumption, aggression is caused by food-induced habituation, however research suggests '*lethal control and the associated fracturing of predator social structure is the primary driver of dangerous and aggressive behaviour*'[3]

Dingoes are both territorial and scavengers (Corbett2001a:50,122) therefore **there is nothing 'unnatural' about dingoes scavenging in campgrounds and stealing food or bait**, but the FIDMS is focused on driving the animals from their territory and into a wild state that never existed on Fraser Island.

Currently strategies are focused on creating fear in both visitors and dingoes. Visitor information is fear-based and all attempts are made to instil fear in the dingoes..

Control methods include:

FENCING: Has caused an abundance of other species within the fenced areas, such as snakes , rodents, spiders and goanna's (*Norma Hannant, Local resident.*)

TRAPPING: Soft jaw traps have caused vascular constriction which can lead to various degrees of necrosis, and restraining animals by the use of a pole noose has lead to death by 'severe fatal hyperthermia.' (Necropsy Report 20/5/11)

TAGGING: Tags can damage the animals ear. It is recommended by 'best' science that animals not be tagged under 12 months of age. The register is inaccurate, some tags have been used multiple times and colours fade within 2 to 3 months.

HAZING: Apart from ethical considerations, it is not considered an effective deterrent. Dingoes quickly become accustomed to a single stimulus and either ignore it, only to return to a certain location when the stimulus is not present. (see visitor comments.)
<http://www.derm.qld.gov.au/register/p00500aa.pdf> P13.

LETHAL CONTROL: Disrupts pack stability causing abnormal behaviour and threatens the sustainability of the dingo population.

The FIDMS is a document of inconsistencies, lack of appropriate research and considering animals are still being destroyed, can be considered ineffectual and detrimental to the future sustainability of the Fraser Island Dingo...

RECOMMENDATIONS.

Through consultation with Researchers, Local Residents, Indigenous Community and Stakeholders, Save Fraser Island Dingoes Inc. make the following recommendations:

Establish a Wildlife Advisory Committee comprising of Local Stakeholders, residents, Indigenous Community and wildlife experts. The Committee to monitor and advise on all matters relating to Fraser Island's unique fauna and to act in the best interest of Wildlife Management.

Members would not be involved in the Tourism Industry.

It is important that Tourism and Wildlife be managed independently of each other to avoid conflict of interest.

Current Committees are ineffectual and/or politically motivated.

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Lethal Control is not a viable or desirable management strategy. A moratorium should be implemented to restore stability to dingo packs. This would eliminate much of the problem behaviour.

...In my experience dingoes are generally shy and elusive creatures with a quite and inquisitive disposition... Intentional feeding/habituation are generally associated with attacks so as one would expect this has been the focus of investigation. In spite of close scrutiny and comprehensive research, all have failed to conclusively identify feeding/habituation as a root cause. We have reviewed numerous publications on the subject and have found only one common factor associated with all cases of human/predator conflict, lethal control. We hypothesise that lethal control and the associated fracturing of predator social structure is the primary driver of dangerous and aggressive behaviour. Adam O'Neill. C&A Environmental Services. Rangeland Research and Restoration.

Consider legislation protecting government agencies from litigation, this would assign responsibility for appropriate behaviour from dingoes to humans and require that visitors be responsible for their personal safety and the safety of their children *In a practical sense this could be achieved by taking into account the behaviour of the humans involved in negative dingo-human interactions when deciding what to do about the dingo or dingoes involved.*[2]

Presently any negative dingo-human interaction results in an animal being destroyed. This is inconsistent with the dingo being considered a 'natural resource' and protected in such areas as World Heritage Listed Fraser Island.

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A review of current educational literature is needed. The overriding focus is instilling fear of the dingoes and to not feed the dingoes, a more balanced approach is required. Whilst feeding must be discouraged and fines apply, the fear campaign has resulted in visitors expecting a negative encounter and acting in response to their expectations. This is exhibited by people screaming, throwing objects and running. This behaviour only encourages confrontation and what would have been a benign and even positive encounter results in a negative response by both dingo and human.

Below is a comparison of a Safety and Information Guide published in Canada.

You are in Bear Country...as a National Park visitor, you share this natural area with bears and other wildlife that depend on it for their survival...by increasing your knowledge of bear behaviour you can reduce the likelihood of an unpleasant encounter and at the same time , help protect the black bear population. With your cooperation, bears and people can co-exist. (Parks Canada 2008)

..as opposed to Qld Parks and Wildlife fear campaign....

Keep kids close..dingoes move quickly..Never feed dingoes...if you are attacked..defend yourself aggressively, you are fighting for your life....Strike the dingo with an object such as a stick,

backpack or coat. (FIDMS brochure.)

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There is an opportunity to provide information on the incoming barges, this is not utilised. An informative talk by rangers or an Indigenous adviser before reaching the Island would be an excellent starting point to a positive visitor experience and reinforce proper behaviour.

Also random inspections of vehicles to prevent flora and fauna from being removed, and, in turn, prevent non-indigenous flora and fauna from being taken to the Island.

Although this has been suggested, there are no brochures or other educational material provided to visitors at entry points. Plants and animals have been removed from the Island.

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Establish a Care Facility where sick or injured wildlife, including any animal injured during a marking procedure, can receive treatment, or be referred to a mainland Vet. This could be manned by Local Wildlife volunteers or suitably qualified rangers.

Present policy is that injured wildlife is either shot or left to the elements as the Island is a wilderness area. It is also a National Park and World Heritage listed, therefore, the manager, QPWS has a 'duty of care' to protect the flora and fauna within its boundaries.

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Feeding Station/Study Zone to be considered according to 'World's best practice'. Feeding only as a supplement at certain times of the year if native food is scarce or during holiday periods to encourage animals away from visitors. No human interference. Observe only.

'The dingo is unique in being both wildlife and the direct descendant of the world's first domesticated animal..therefore there is no inconsistency in seeing the dingo as wildlife, while accepting the need to afford it human/management in settings like Fraser Island.' Dr. Ernest Healy. Monash University.

....hunger is the actual cause of problem behaviour (Price 1994) and the incidence of stalking is most likely attributed to lack of foods available.

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A full comprehensive re-evaluation of incident reporting is a priority. Dingoes are being destroyed due to incorrect ranger observations and uneducated visitor comments.

At present 'incidents' are categorised from A to E.

A: is an animal which 'avoids people'.

B: Includes curious, loitering at recognised visitor site, not wary, non-aggressive.

C: Living under infrastructure, loitering, stealing food/property, soliciting food.

D: Dominant/submissive testing, stalking, growling.

E: Lunging, biting/nipping

To consider all of the above as requiring an 'incident' report exhibits a fundamental lack of understanding of normal dingo behaviour.

Rangers need to be divided into two categories.

(1) Those trained to manage wildlife, including a **Wildlife Biologist** to specifically care for and

monitor the Fraser Island dingo.

(2) Those trained to manage visitors, interact and educate tourists.

This is 'best' practice in National Parks worldwide, e.g. Yellowstone National Park in the USA.

'Visitor' rangers need to be seen and heard. Face to face talks by rangers has been reported to..*halt dingo incidents.. this approach demonstrated that such contact is one of the most productive ways of changing visitor behaviour.* (Qld. EPA, QPWS,2001a). A live-on policy with rangers stationed at campgrounds and high visitor areas would make this feasible.

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Establish an Interpretive/Information Centre and encourage Island residents and the Indigenous Community to be part of, and engage in visitor education. Invite University Students and volunteers to observe the dingo and other wildlife, this would provide a continuous source of information to the Government.

'Leave the dingoes alone, it's their country.' Aunty Marie Wilkinson. Butchulla Elder.

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Strategies for managing visitors is imperative if tourism is to remain sustainable. The impact of tourism can be reduced if measures are taken to better monitor and control the activities of tourists and their vehicles. Visitation needs to be developed in a way which allows tourists to experience the Island in a more controlled, more engaged and environmentally focused manner. Management over the whole of the annual cycle and especially at peak times such as Christmas, Easter and School Holidays, needs to be addressed. (LNP Discussion Paper 2010.)

'In an overall threats analysis based on the transcripts of all expert scientific respondents it was no surprise to see that **recreational activity emerged as the greatest potential threat to the attributes defining World Heritage character on Fraser Island.** The second highest threat was the **lack of knowledge about the impacts of such visitor activity on ecological and cultural integrity,** and the third ranked potential threat was **infrastructure development.** This basic finding highlights the **priority to effectively manage tourist activity** in the Park as a primary means of sustaining ecological and cultural integrity.' UNESCO.

SUMMARY.

Conservation of the Island's biodiversity, natural heritage and cultural values must be the main concern of government agencies. Research, education and awareness is essential to preserve the environment, the flora and fauna, and to operate a successful and sustainable Tourism Industry.

An annual review and assessment of strategies is critical to evaluate the problems and progress of policies implemented. A code of ethics formulated and followed for the humane treatment of the Fraser Island dingo should be seriously considered.

References:

[1]A history of Fraser Island. Pat O'Brien.

[2]Lines in the Sand: An anthropological Discourse on Wildlife Tourism. Georgette Leah Burns.

[3]Wallach AD, Ritchie EG, Read J, O'Neill AJ, 2009 More than Mere Numbers: The Impact of Lethal Control on the Social Stability of a Top-Order Predator.

APPENDIX:

Observations of a Tourist Guide.

...I saw a camper rub grease from a barbecue on his hands and lay down with his hands extended towards a dingo, the dingo approached licked his hand and nipped him..this was reported as a dingo attack.

...A group of dingoes were sitting under bushes away from tourists, a visitor walked towards them and when they stood to look at her, she ran screaming and tripped, this excited the animals, they followed and one nipped her on the ankle..reported as aggressive behaviour.

..Parents were not supervising their children, even though there were five dingoes standing nearby, they didn't watch whilst the small children skipped around the car playing...of course this excited the young dingoes and they took up the game. The kids then complained to the parents who then complained about the 'dangerous dingoes.'

..Campers were feeding a couple of dingoes, when they got tired of this they started throwing stones at the animals..

.. I witnessed a 4wheel drive deliberately trying to run down a dingo on the beach. This is not an uncommon site.

Comments by visitors:

I was fortunate to have visited beautiful Fraser Island in Sept. Of 1982, The island was clean, campers well behaved aside from some stupid driving on the beaches and trails. Many healthy dingoes were seen and no one acted fearful of them -- they were just THERE, doing dingo stuff and occasionally interacting with people.

In 2008 I sent some overseas visitors who were keen to see dingoes on Fraser Island and was dismayed when they returned with tales of pathetic, starving animals, droop-eared and skulking. Why the change?



...My family and I were sitting on the beach enjoying the view, two dingoes arrived and lay down about 10 metres from us, minding their own business, a ranger vehicle arrived and rangers took out a shanghai and proceeded to shoot the animals who ran in terror, this so distressed us and our children we packed up and left the Island as soon as possible....

I recently visited Fraser Is with excitement and left feeling sad and ashamed. In this tropical paradise I saw beautiful dogs starving to death and being cruelly and inhumanely treated. I spoke to residents who were deeply saddened by the dingoes and their plight.

They now live in compounds with electrified grids. They and the dingoes are suffering emotionally from the separation and they live in fear of the Authorities... I was glad to get off the island and I won't go back while they are killing these beautiful dogs.

I grew up in Hervey Bay and went on many family holidays to Fraser Island in our 4WD. Over the years we've noticed a dramatic decline in the number of Dingoes and changes in their behaviours. I witnessed two situations that broke my heart then and still does today. I saw a Dingo so emaciated bones were sticking out everywhere possible; it was so weak it barely had the energy to walk. Near Indian head I saw rangers arrive in their 4WD and when they got out of the car the Dingo bolted in to the bushes with its tail between its legs. The sight of the car and the uniform was enough to scare the Dingo into hiding. What are they doing to them that we don't know about that provokes this kind of behaviour?

