

A History of FIDO and its Campaigns

Fraser Island Defenders Organization — The Watchdog of Fraser Island

FIDO's Role

The Fraser Island Defenders Organization (FIDO) has been campaigning to protect Fraser Island from non-sustainable uses since 1971. Throughout its history FIDO has doggedly aimed *"to ensure the wisest use of the natural resources of Fraser Island"*.

In doing so FIDO has addressed for distinct issues:

- stopping sandmining
- preventing logging, further degrading the forests,
- having the island's World Heritage values properly recognized and protected, and
- achieving better management of the natural and cultural resources including providing ecologically sustainable transportation, protecting the wilderness qualities and preserving its historical heritage.

Many of these campaigns ran simultaneously and frequently overlapped.

Sandmining

Because of the severity of the environmental impact of sandmining, FIDO's initial focus was to stop this industry progressing on Fraser Island. Our campaign began in January, 1971, before any mining operations began on the island. FIDO's opposition was maintained until mining ceased on 31 December, 1976. The threat of its resumption finally ceased in 1991, when the Queensland Government terminated all mining leases.

The mineral wealth of Fraser Island had long been known but its isolation and difficult environment had previously deterred most miners. Oil drillers prospected it in the 1960s but its greatest wealth was in the heavy mineral containing rutile, zircon, monazite and ilmenite, which in many places can be seen as black seams in the sand.

In 1966, when there was no organized conservation movement, sandminers were granted mining leases covering 8665 hectares of Fraser Island. This was done without even the knowledge of affected landholders. From then until 1989 the Queensland Government actively sought to have Fraser Island mined for its mineral resources. It commissioned a land-use study of Fraser Island by an interdepartmental committee in November 1970. The committee visited Fraser Island for less than 48 hours on a poorly organized inspection ignored conservationists and recommended that sand mining should proceed.

FIDO's opposition to mining was based on the devastating impact it would have on the fragile landscape, which could never return again to its previous state and the impact that mining infrastructure would have on the nature and character of Fraser Island.

Logging

Stopping logging was another of FIDO's major campaigns. Logging on Fraser Island had been an industry since 1863 but FIDO identified logging as incompatible with the best long-term use of Fraser Island. As FIDO scrutinized the impact of logging during the 1970s and 80s it soon became obvious that the nature and character of the island's unique forests was being transformed. It took FIDO 15 years after the cessation of sandmining to achieve a cessation of timber extraction from Fraser Island.

World Heritage and National Park

While both of the above campaigns proceeded FIDO was also working hard to have outstanding natural qualities of Fraser Island recognized and protected. Fraser Island was first proposed as a National Park in 1893. FIDO wanted almost the whole island to become a National Park (excluding the settlements) to provide a level of guaranteed protection by the Queensland Government. In 1998, 27 years after FIDO began its campaign, this objective was realized.

From 1974, even before the World Heritage Convention became operational, FIDO has urged that the unique island's World Heritage values be recognized and protected. As a result of recommendations of the Fitzgerald Commission, listing finally occurred in 1992. That recognized Fraser Island as the greatest coastal sandmass in the world. World Heritage listing also obliges the Commonwealth Government to ensure that the island's special values are protected.

Management for Sustainability

With three of FIDO's four main objectives now resolved FIDO's agenda is more actively focussed on ensuring sustainable management. FIDO has had this focus since developing the first Fraser Island Management Plan in 1975. This Management Strategy for the island has since been revised three times (1978, 1986, and 1991).

Recreation is Fraser Island's most difficult management issue. Because the Queensland Government's first Management Plan in 1978 related to recreation only, management of recreation has for too long had precedence over natural resource management. In 1997, the Queensland Government acknowledged that most of the major tourist routes and most of Fraser Island's popular places were being used beyond their capacity. The major difficulty is that the sand substrate is so vulnerable to any disturbance. This makes it prone to erosion and every major downpour of rain relocates thousands of tonnes of sand. Some of this sand is seriously degrading island icons such as the perched dune lakes and streams.

The public interest demands that this World Heritage property remain accessible to as many people as is sustainable and FIDO has been seeking acceptable ways to achieve that outcome and since 1974 has advocated the establishment of a light rail people mover. FIDO wants better facilities for walkers in a walking trail network.

Aspects of management not directly related to tourism include fire management, weeds and preventing the introduction of feral fauna. All these injurious agencies can impact on the natural integrity of Fraser Island.

Although both the Queensland and Commonwealth Governments now have obligations to protect this fragile island, experience shows that the best managed World Heritage sites are those where watchdogs, such as FIDO, remain active and vigilant. FIDO's role is to draw the attention of the public, public servants and politicians to any actions or decisions that adversely impact on Fraser Island and to ensure that such actions are corrected.

This Educational Supplement to MOONBI 100 published in October, 2001 describes FIDO's origins and achievements during its first 30 years.

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FIDO Formed

The Hervey Bay Foreshore Conservation Association and the Maryborough and Bundaberg Branches of the Wildlife Preservation Society of Queensland were all formed in 1967, the year after mining leases had been granted over much of Fraser Island. Although they thought that it was too late to stop sandmining leases they were determined to try to limit its impacts.

Dillingham-Murphores: In January 1971, Dillingham-Murphores consortium (D.M. Minerals) applied for four new mining leases with an area in exceeding 5000 hectares.

Realizing the support of the Queensland Government for sandmining the three conservation groups agreed that a strong single committee was needed to oppose the latest mining applications. They formed the Fraser Island Defence Committee address the complex conservation issues on this island which until then was little known to people outside the region. FIDO had strongly opposed the new lease applications in the Mining Wardens Court.

Name and Logo: Leading scientist and environmental writer Dr. L.J. Webb suggested changing the name from "Committee" to "Organization". The acronym of "FIDO, the Watchdog of Fraser Island" was soon famous. Cartoonist Stewart McCrae designed FIDO's famous logo of a bulldog guarding the Island. The organization remains known as FIDO although for legal reasons it had to change "Defence" to "Defenders".

QTM: In December, 1971, some 11 months after FIDO was formed, Queensland Titanium Mines (QTM) started first sandmining operations near North Spit. Over the next five years, QTM dug through a 17-kilometre strip, up to 150 metres wide, almost to the mouth of Second Creek. About 200 hectares of foredune were mined but the severe environmental impact extended well beyond the area actually mined.

Court Battles: There were continual legal skirmishes between FIDO and the sandmining companies. Most of these occurred in the Mining Warden's Court. FIDO's 1971, opposition in the Mining Warden's Court and the political arena led sandminers to renounce about 2,200 hectares of leases near Sandy Cape Lighthouse. They persisted with other two claims totalling 3244 hectares.

High Court: As a result of one hearing, John Sinclair (on behalf of FIDO) took an appeal to the High Court of Australia against a decision based on the Warden's definition of the "public interest". Sinclair's appeal was successful. The High Court defined the "public interest" as being quite distinct from public opinion.

Notoriety Begat Visitation: In 1970 before sandmining became an issue visitor numbers were estimated at only about 5000. As a result of the controversy and notoriety Fraser Island visitor numbers grew rapidly. By 2000 there were over 300,000 visitors.

National Estate Inquiry: Because the issues on Fraser Island epitomized many of the Australian land-use conflicts, the Committee of Inquiry into the National Estate spent four days on a FIDO safari in 1973. The safari helped to elevate the significance of the Fraser Island struggle to a new height at the national level. Three years later Fraser Island became the first place in Australia placed on the new Register of the National Estate.

Fraser Island Environmental Inquiry

In December, 1974, the Whitlam Federal Government secretly granted D.M. Minerals a licence to export Fraser Island mineral sands without any environmental impact assessment. A fierce political controversy ensued. Despite conservation opposition and requests by the Federal Environment Minister, D.M. Minerals refused to defer mining operations while an environmental assessment was done. DM Minerals began sandmining on Fraser Island in May. For the next 80 weeks, the company mined over two hectares per week. While this was going on, the Commonwealth Government established the Fraser Island Environmental Inquiry the first full-scale environmental inquiry ever held under the Environmental Protection (Impact of Proposals) Act (1974). The Queensland Government saw the inquiry as an intrusion on its "state's right" to grant mining leases and boycotted the inquiry. The inquiry took eighteen months to deliberate on the huge volume of evidence placed before it. It survived unsuccessful High Court challenges by the Dillingham-Murphores Partnership to its validity and jurisdiction before it delivered its report in October, 1976.

FIDO argued that the aesthetic values of Fraser Island were so outstanding that they deserved the utmost protection. The extractive sandmining industry argued that there was no significant incompatibility between their operations and the retention of aesthetic values. After lengthy hearings and inspections, the Fraser Island Environmental Inquiry reported in October, 1976, that: *"The natural environment of Fraser Island is of great significance, complexity and fragility. The island possesses individual features of great attraction and importance-such as its perched lakes, immense beaches, cliffs of Teewah (coloured) sands, sandblows and rainforested sand dunes. But the inevitable highlighting of the presence and importance of these individual features of its natural environment should not be allowed to obscure the links and interdependency of its main fragile elements, while, overall, an impression of wilderness gives unity to the broad spectrum of the particular natural features of the Island."*

The Report concluded with three major recommendations:

that the export of mineral sands from Fraser Island be banned;
that regional compensation be applied to offset any adverse economic effects from banning sandmining;
and
that Fraser Island be recorded in its entirety as part of the National Estate."

As a result of the Inquiry the Australian Government revoked export licences for any mineral sands extracted above the high water mark. Sandmining on Fraser Island ceased on 31 December, 1976, after just over 400 hectares had been denuded of its natural vegetation and mined. The Commonwealth Government offered a \$5 Million compensation package to affected contractors and to promote regional employment to accommodate displaced mine workers.

On 3 December, 1976, Fraser Island became the first item to be listed on the Australian Register of the National Estate and in Parliament the Federal Environment Minister said that he would propose it for World Heritage Listing.