



Fraser Island Defenders Organization

FIDO — The Watchdog of Fraser Island

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Aim: To ensure the wisest use of Fraser Island's natural resources

27th February, 2006

Committee Secretary□

Senate Environment, Communications, Information Technology and the Arts Committee

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Department of the Senate□

Parliament House□

CANBERRA ACT 2600□

Dear Secretary,

Re: Inquiry into Australia's national parks, conservation reserves and marine protected areas.

The Fraser Island Defenders Organization has been an active voluntary organization campaigning for the protection of the outstanding natural values of South East Queensland's Great Sandy Region since January 1971. Much of this area now has statutory recognition and protection as national parks, conservation reserves and marine protected areas:

- Fraser Island is now almost entirely included in a National Park and has World Heritage status;
- Cooloola now has almost entirely National Park status and is scheduled to be included in an expanded World Heritage area when Fraser Island is renominated;
- Great Sandy Strait is a Ramsar site and proposed for World Heritage inclusion; and
- Great Sandy Marine Park (Northern Section) has been declared and is about to be zoned by the end of this year.

We therefore have a great interest in the Great Sandy Region which is recognized as being of outstanding national and international significance. However, our view of the national priorities is not shared by the Australian national government.

The Current government has abdicated its responsibilities for protecting World Heritage areas such as Fraser Island. It has assumed full responsibility for some World Heritage areas such as the Great Barrier Reef, Kakadu and Uluru, but has treated Fraser Island shamefully. It would be euphemistic to describe the Howard government's contribution to this most significant region as tokenistic.

Tokenistic financial support: The financial contributions of the Commonwealth Government towards the management has shrunk from a then inadequate amount of about \$600,000 annually to less than \$50,000 annually. That \$50,000 amount is only provides secretarial support and to facilitate meetings of both the Fraser Island World Heritage

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appreciated it falls far short of the role and the responsibility that the Commonwealth should be accepting for this very important national and international icon.

As well as having outstanding natural values, Fraser Island makes a major contribution to the national economy and this is being overlooked by Canberra when allocating its meager hand-outs. Although an independent study in 2001 showed that Fraser Island was contributing more than \$275 million annually to the national economy, Fraser Island continues to be treated as a very poor relation by the Commonwealth which seems to be wholly focused on Canberra.

Commonwealth World Heritage Obligations: FIDO believes that the Commonwealth has an obligation to take full responsibility for areas which it has agreed to nominate for World Heritage listing. FIDO believes that this should entail actively ensuring that its obligations are met and if necessary assuming the management as it has done in Kakadu and Uluru.

Constraints on National Heritage Funding for National Parks: The Commonwealth currently has rules in place which prevent any Commonwealth funding being spent in National Parks. It has also established conditions which make it virtually impossible for any of the National Heritage money to be provided to assist in the management of Fraser Island. A conditions of allocation of National Heritage money is that it MUST NOT be spent on any project where a state government has a core responsibility. Because virtually all of Fraser Island is National Park or other state owned land Thus this organization is ineligible to get any National Heritage funds to assist it to carry out weeding projects on the Fraser Island National Park. This is placing an undue burden on the Queensland Government which receives no direct contributions from the Commonwealth to manage this World Heritage area. It is obstructing the Traditional Owners from receiving any financial support to work on very important cultural projects on Fraser Island.

No Financial Assistance for Voluntary Community Groups to Weed in National Parks: The rules applied to the spending of National Heritage funds make it extremely difficult for volunteers who want to assist the Queensland Government manage Fraser Island make a contribution. Currently all of FIDO's weeding efforts must be limited to the townships of Eurong and Happy Valley which are seen as urban and outside the Queensland Government's core responsibilities. This year FIDO working bees on Fraser Island expect to contribute more than 1600 volunteer hours of work to help control weeds in the townships. While these happen to be the main centres of weed infestation on Fraser Island they are not the only areas with weed problems. This year FIDO received \$28,200 from the Burnett Mary Regional Group without which we couldn't afford to undertake this project due to the expensive nature of working on Fraser Island. While this work will be within the World Heritage area it will not be within the Fraser Island National Park. Weeds are seen as a major threat to Fraser Island's World Heritage values yet the Commonwealth is barely assisting to address this because of the rules it has imposed which make it easier for private landholders to obtain grants to add to the value of their properties than it is for a community based group to obtain financial assistance so that we are not too much responsibility

Abdication of any responsibility for Monitoring Park Management: Apart from its parsimonious approach to financially contributing to the management the Fraser Island World Heritage area, the Commonwealth has also shown a gross dereliction in its responsibilities in monitoring the management of the World Heritage sites. It is as though the Commonwealth wants to be like the three wise monkeys by not seeing or hearing anything which might require the Commonwealth to assume more responsibility. In the

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last two years the Commonwealth has been conspicuous by its failure to be represented at meetings of the Fraser Island Advisory Committees and had to be prodded to get a representative to even one meeting in 2005. So far there has been no representation at any meetings in 2006. It as though the Commonwealth is afraid that by attending any meetings in Queensland a representative may say something which would imply the Commonwealth had some obligations to do something. The three wise monkey's approach is very apposite. .

Failure to Apply EPBC Act in a Ramsar Site: FIDO was recently alarmed to discover a very large pearl farm was established in 2005 around Little Woody Island at the northern end of Great Sandy Strait. Although this is both adjacent to (if not partly in) the Fraser Island World Heritage area, and certainly wholly within the Great Sandy Strait Ramsar site FIDO has since learnt that this occurred without any approvals or applications under EPBC Act. The matter is of great concern to all stakeholders on the Community Advisory Committee but when the matter was discussed on 3rd February there was nobody from the Commonwealth to take note of the concerns expressed let alone take any follow up action. This is but another example of where a more active Commonwealth presence on the scene would be able to address a very serious community concern.

The Commonwealth has a responsibility for ensuring that Australia is honouring its World Heritage obligations. This can't be done properly if it is treated only as a desktop exercise from Canberra and is limited only to preparing reports to the World Heritage Committee without monitoring what is happening on the ground. It requires more active monitoring than has been provided over recent years and it requires some regular Commonwealth presence in the region.

To is currently organizing its second biennial Conference on Fraser Island. The Commonwealth didn't deign even attend the first conference held in Noosa in August 2004. Under the present regime we would be optimistic to expect that any Commonwealth representative would attend the conference we are organizing in conjunction with the University of the Sunshine Coast and the Scientific Advisory Committee on the theme of "Maintaining the natural integrity of the Great Sandy Region".

World Heritage responsibilities: "Integrity" is at the core of Australia's World Heritage responsibilities. One of the key issues to the maintenance of the integrity is maintaining the optimum fire regime. This is not being done currently because the Queensland Government can't afford to use aerial ignition to carry out management burns. Failing to ensure that there is a proper fire regime on Fraser Island is just one area where the Commonwealth is being derelict in its responsibilities.

Lack of Ministerial Council Meetings: It is not only the lack of any demonstrable interest by the Commonwealth bureaucracy in the management of Fraser Island it reaches the very top. It is more than a decade since the Queensland and Federal Environment Minister's established a mechanism for management of the Fraser Island World Heritage area which establish Advisory Committees reporting to a Management Committee which has been set up to include senior representatives of Local State and Commonwealth Governments which in turn would report to a Ministerial Council. The Commonwealth has been derelict in seeing that the Management Committee is regularly convened thus leaving the responsibilities and decisions almost entirely in Queensland hands. This is not to criticize the Queensland management but we believe that it would be significantly improved if there was more active Commonwealth participation in the process.

It is difficult to raise the enthusiasm for convening a Management Committee if the Ministerial Council never meets. It is our understanding that there has been only a 10

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minute discussion of Fraser Island World Heritage matters in 10 years and this was a cursory discussion in Cairns several years ago at the conclusion of Ministerial Council Meetings for the Great Barrier Reef and the Wet Tropics.

It is FIDO's view that the meetings of the Ministerial Council would act as a catalyst to ensure that there was better reporting and more accountability. Regular scheduled meetings would act to focus the attention of other aspects of the management and set some deadlines for actions to be completed.

This has been demonstrated again and again. The latest example has been the inordinate delay in resolving the proposed boundaries for the new World Heritage nomination which is to expand on the Fraser Island area to include Cooloola and other parts of the World Heritage

A system for rating parks and reserves to establish Commonwealth priorities: It is FIDO's view that the Commonwealth needs to establish a classification system using criteria similar to the criteria used for World Heritage to rank national parks, conservation reserves and marine protected areas into those of international significance, those of national significance, those of state significance, those of regional significance and those of local significance.

Once this has been established we would submit that the Commonwealth would then clearly have some responsibility to assist with management of those parks and reserves which had been identified for whatever reason as being of national significance. We would expect that this would at least clear the way for the Commonwealth to assist those groups advancing projects which would help preserve the integrity of World Heritage areas such as weeding. We would urge it to go further and to provide grants to assist the state governments better manage parks of national significance.

FIDO welcomes this Senate Inquiry to expose how poorly the Howard government has been dealing with the parks and reserves of the Great Sandy Region. We would welcome an opportunity to elaborate on the matters raised in this submission.

Yours sincerely

John Sinclair,
Honorary Project Officer.