

The Tale of Two Islands

Address to the Stradbroke Island Management Organization, AGM 19th June, 2010
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Because I was living in Maryborough, raising a young family there, wrestling with a university course by correspondence and heavily engaged with conservation work I was late coming to see Stradbroke Island for the first time. The first time I landed here was in 1975 when I drove over in a friend's suped-up Land Rover to see the impacts of mining for myself. I had seen the devastating of mining from the air but it wasn't the same as having first-hand on the ground experience and my advisers said I must be able to speak from first-hand experience before I gave evidence to the Fraser Island Environmental Inquiry that was then sitting.

Knowing that my probing would probably be expected and that given my reputation at the time I wouldn't be a welcome visitor, I was eager to avoid being seen by the miners before I had seen what I needed to see. I took a back track into the Yarraman Hill area where we were right out in the open. We roamed about observing and clicking cameras until we were observed. I wasn't really worried because in this hotted up Land Rover I could outrun any vehicle the miners had. However, with two and then three mining company vehicles, each equipped with radio communication, triangulating to cut me off, I was soon trapped and hauled off to the company office.

I wasn't charged with trespass but I was evicted from the island. Subsequently in the early 1980s I did get a chance to return a couple of times while organizing adult education programs. These allowed me to drop in on Oodgeroo Noonuccal at Moongalba as I drove across the island. It was Kath Walker's deeply moving poem "*Minjerriba*" that had inspired me to fight so doggedly to protect Fraser Island. — particularly those lines.

*But Minjerriba's back is now broken;
Men came and tore out his guts;
Stole his rich grains of sand,
Stripped his cloak of cyprus and gum,
Drained water from his ageless eyes
And weakened this giant in the sun.*

However my legal battles with Joh Bjelke-Petersen saw me lose my challenging adult education job and ultimately move to live interstate for 19 years. That is how so many years have passed since my last visit.

That is also why I welcome the opportunity now to make up some of that not quite lost time and to focus on the tale of our two islands.

I do this also out of a sense of guilt in having devoted myself to Fraser Island while knowing that 24 hours a day seven days a week for 30 years miners have been churning away the sands of Stradbroke Island and I have done nothing to raise public awareness of the importance of saving Stradbroke Island from further impacts.

By the time the real threat to Fraser Island emerged in 1970, sandmining had already been eating away at the heart of Stradbroke Island for two decades and the impacts were ringing very loud alarm bells through Queensland's infant conservation movement.

The fight to save Fraser Island from sandmining was inspired by ensuring that it didn't become another Stradbroke Island.

Unfortunately there was a perception then that Stradbroke Island was already a lost cause.

The fight was to save Fraser from sandmining and the whole conservation movement threw its weight behind that campaign.

Unfortunately to there wasn't a campaign to simultaneously stop it progressing on Stradbroke Island. When threatened Moreton Island a similar campaign against the mining emerged. Stradbroke Island was again held up as an example of what had to be avoided. Stradbroke was unfortunately seen as a sacrificial lamb in the various anti-sandmining campaigns were fought to save other sand masses from Moreton Island to Gladstone.

However this sacrificial lamb has spilt more than enough blood and things the approach of the communities of South East Queensland has changed.

Fraser Island and Stradbroke Island have much in common:

- Both are forested sand islands anchored to rocky headlands with complex dune systems and similar ecologies although Stradbroke doesn't have the rainforest and Fraser Island no longer has koalas;
- Both have the Pacific Ocean on one side and magnificent sheltered bays that are internationally recognized Ramsar Wetlands on the other;
- Both have fascinating dune lakes although Fraser Island may be better endowed;
- Both have been subject to sandmining, but sandmining scarred only about 500 ha or about 0.2% of Fraser Island between 1971 and 1976. The impacts of that are still visible but not as visible as the impact of mining on Stradbroke Island that could be seen from the mainland

The other differences between our two islands though are most significant:

- Stradbroke Island is only a sixth of the size of Fraser Island;
- The Great Sandy National Park covers almost 99% of Fraser Island while the only National Park on Straddie is 457 ha. This is only about 1.6% of its total area. In other words Stradbroke Island has only the same percentage of its are within the National Park as Fraser Island has left out;
- Stradbroke Island has a resident population of more than 2,000 while Fraser Island's permanent residents are still fewer than 100;
- The other great difference is in the nature of its industries; Despite its distance from Brisbane and other major population centres, Fraser Island has a flow of about 350,000 visitors annually and independent consultants have calculated that Fraser Island's tourist industry generates over \$M280 for the national economy annually and an estimated 2,880 jobs are generated in the Fraser Coast and Sunshine Coast regions from tourism and recreation on Fraser Island.. However the Queensland Yearbook's suggests that the total output of mineral sands from the state is worth only \$M100 annually

(not all from Stradbroke) and Straddie's contribution is scheduled to decrease as the resource is depleted.

Because sandmining operations were out of the public eye few people had access to see exactly what was occurring. But those who did were appalled. Legendary ecologist the late Len Webb was one who saw the impacts of the devastation of the 18 Mile Swamp and the gouging of Yarraman Hill and this increased his resolve that such an environmental catastrophe should never be inflicted on Fraser Island. University of Queensland's Walt Westman and Alan Thatcher studied the rehabilitation attempts and concluded that it would take 500 years if ever before anything approaching the original ecosystems could be re-established. We now know from the work of CSIRO soil scientists work in Cooloola that the development of a soil profile takes hundreds if not thousands of years and there was every right for the alarm bells to be ringing very loud.

Having explained why sandmining is so destructive of the natural environment I need to explain what has changed so significantly to affect the future of Stradbroke Island since the industry got its foothold here 60 years ago.

1. South East Queensland has now become the fastest growing region in Australia. That has very significant implications because the increased population is both reducing the amount of green space in the region but adding to the numbers demanding green space. Stradbroke Island is one of the few areas where that is available. However it can only become available if the public isn't locked out (or chased out) because the bulk is held in mining leases.
2. Many of the leases on Stradbroke have expired. The Queensland Government at last has an opportunity to pull the pin at least on the expired leases without paying compensation.
3. Mining yields relatively little to the economy compared to tourism. And it is profit that can be made only once. When the mining inevitably finishes what legacy will it leave? The difference between the public benefit from mining and making the areas now locked up in mining leases available for public recreation are such that even now it may well be in the public

interest for the Queensland Government to pay out the mining companies for their remaining leases.

4. Peak oil has now arrived possibly a couple of years ago. While the global financial crisis obscured this very significant historic milestone it is most relevant to Stradbroke Island. As the price of fuel rises dramatically with global economic recovery, people will begin to curb their travel. They will increasingly look to destinations closer to home. Many will discover that they can get the same experience on Stradbroke or Moreton Islands or even Cooloola without going as far as Fraser Island. We can already see evidence of this trend in the dramatically growing popularity of camping at Inskip Point rather than crossing to Fraser Island. Stradbroke Island will become an increasingly popular holiday destination but how popular it will be will depend on the availability of recreation space.
5. When sandmining began on Stradbroke in 1950 it was almost invisible and people weren't worried about it. It is now no longer "out of sight — Out of mind". The larger Queensland public (that is the SEQ mainlanders) can now see the impact and are becoming increasingly worried about this ever growing cancer on the doorstep of Brisbane. They are increasingly wanting to see an end to this environmentally destructive industry.

I understand the divisions here on Stradbroke Island about the benefits that sandmining delivers to this community. However I should explain that it is the interests of any industry to promote the benefits they deliver even if they are illusory. Unfortunately there is usually a lot of exaggeration of the benefits.

For example, Bob Hawke was convinced by the timber industry that if logging on Fraser Island ceased over 500 jobs would be lost. As a result of The Fitzgerald Inquiry into Fraser Island logging in 1991 thought that 500 was an over estimate but that it would be still in the public interest to close down the timber industry even if it meant fully paying out those workers displaced. However when all of those who were displaced and entitled to generous redundancy payments and retraining etc. there were only 60 people to line up. Similar inflated

figures on the numbers of jobs in the wider mining industry are currently being bandied about in the Super-profits tax debate.

It isn't easy to identify how over a quarter of a billion dollars is generated for the economy and 2,880 jobs are derived from Fraser Island tourism. After all there are only about 350,000 visitors per annum. Apart from spending money plotting and preparing to get there in motor dealerships, fishing tackle and camping shops, motels and restaurants on the mainland, grocery retailers there are those who provide tourist services on the island who in turn have to be supported by a wide range of goods and services. The spending swirls around to the people who provide the housing and services to those who supply the goods and services to the tourists visiting Fraser Island. Fraser Island and whale watching has allowed the City of Hervey Bay to have the fastest growth of any coastal city in Queensland on a per capita basis.

The end of sandmining on Stradbroke Island wouldn't be a death knell. Providing it happens sooner rather than later, it will be the beginning of a better and more prosperous future for Minjerriba. I should offer some political advice that might help SIMO to achieve the best outcome for this marvellous island on Brisbane's doorstep.

Mining was avoided on Moreton Island through a public inquiry. Mining on Fraser Island ceased as a result of the Fraser Island Environmental Inquiry and Logging stopped as a result of a thorough investigation by the Fitzgerald Fraser Island Inquiry. Inquiries are daunting and complicated but if they are well conducted that can sift through the complexities and have access to details not easily available such as what is the exact value of the minerals gained and what other benefits are there and what are the legalities that need to be considered. They can quantify those issues I identified about the rate of shrinking green space etc. We may be already able to give them those answers but politicians have reasons to be suspicious of people with a vested interest even though our interest is only the public interest. And why should we have to pocket the expense of producing the information that any responsible government should be obtaining anyhow.