

Developing Sustainable Tourism in the Great Sandy Region

John Sinclair

Honorary Project Officer

Fraser Island Defenders Organization

Abstract

While tourism based on the natural parts of the Great Sandy Region is estimated to generate more than half a billion dollars annually, many studies and observations have identified aspects that are unsustainable. This paper examines the factors that are contributing to the current unsustainability of tourism in the Great Sandy Region.

Most of the visitors to Fraser Island are now carried by commercial tour operators with the highest ecotourism accreditation ratings but that accreditation hasn't resulted in any significant changes to their operations to reduce their environmental impact on as far as transport and destinations are concerned. For most tour operators considerations of environmental impact are subservient to the profitability of any operations.

The accreditation of nature based tour operators in the Great Sandy Region as approved "Eco Certified Advanced Ecotourism" seems to be based more on the experience given to the tourist clients rather than the environmental sustainability of the methods of operation. Although accreditation of ecotourism operators has helped their respective marketing strategies, it hasn't contributed much if anything to improving their environmental sustainability. Consumers of ecotourism products are generally unaware that they are exacerbating the environmental degradation in the Great Sandy Region. Buses from Noosa continue to drive right through Cooloola which has equivalent environmental features to Fraser Island to capitalize on the marketability of Fraser Island icons such as Central Station and Lake McKenzie.

Despite a study by engineers into a more sustainable road system on Fraser Island commercial operators continue to shun the recommended changes in modus operandi and continue to damage Fraser Island roads with the most eco-unfriendly vehicles. There seems to be no significant attempt to improve fuel economy of the vehicles used or to reduce the amount of CO₂ emissions per person carried might be reduced or to stop using sites which are already over-used and where current visitation is clearly unsustainable.

- —o0o— -

far as sustainability is concerned and in some cases seems to have been assumed to be a licence to pursuing very unsustainable practices including carrying people on buses resulting in unacceptable environmental degradation to the natural environment.

1. The value of Fraser Island tourism

- (a) Klienhardt
- (b) Cooloola tourism
- (c) Whate watching
- (d) Recreational Fishing

2. The Impacts showing symptoms of unsustainability:

- (a) the GHD Report
- (b) the EDAW (Aust) Pty Ltd study
- (c) The Site Capacities Study

3. The current Operations

4.

In the GHD study carried out before it was truncated by the QPWS they had some very significant findings: They found:

Moderate severity smothering 6% of road network;

Moderate downcutting 7% of road network

High severity siltation 8 sites

Cultural heritage site 1 site impacted by roads

High severity smothering 1% of road network

Severe downcutting 2% of road network

Moderate severity siltation 12 sites

These are clearly unacceptable impacts in a World Heritage site but they confirmed what had been the observations of long-time Fraser Island users in the major causes for the accelerating depreciations of the roads.

The GHD study did impact studies of the different vehicles to use the sand tracks on Fraser Island and found that the greatest impact was from buses and that many factors could help mitigate against the impact of any vehicles. These were automatic transmission, lighter vehicles, lower tyre pressures and larger tyres. They looked at alternative modes of transport on the island concluded that the only way to make the buses sustainable was that they should be fitted with wheels and tyres. The Eco Certified Advanced Ecotourism accredited operators on Fraser Island concluded that it would expose them to prohibitive expenditure with tyre repairs and replacements if they lowered the tyre pressure on their buses as recommended and continue to run their buses with normal tyre pressure in the interests of maintaining the profit margins.

The