

# Shiretoko and Fraser Island World Heritage Sites

## Comparisons and contrasts

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The first impressions are that the only thing common between Fraser Island and Shiretoko is their World Heritage listing. With contrasts such as the difference in latitude and the stark difference in geological origins many may not see the many similarities between Fraser Island and Shiretoko World Heritage sites. Lying around Latitude 25 degrees South, Fraser Island is a subtropical island created almost entirely by wind-blown sand reaching 240 metres at the highest point and with trees more than 50 metres in height. Shiretoko peninsula is based on a chain of active volcanoes that reach elevations of more than 1500 metres that form the peninsula. It lies at latitude 44 degrees North. Shiretoko is seasonally cloaked in snow and surrounded by sea ice. They are in different countries. Fraser Island is in a relatively lightly populated Australia compared with Shiretoko in the densely populated Japan albeit in the sparser Hokkaido Prefecture. Yet despite these obvious differences the two World Heritage sites share many aspects of management in common. Both only achieved World Heritage status after prolonged campaigns by non-government advocates and in both cases the opponents advocated continuing the timber industries.

If the killer whales, sperm whales, seals and sea lions of the Shiretoko waters could be interchanged with the Humpback whales, dugong and turtles in the waters surrounding Fraser Island; if Fraser Island dingoes could be considered the same light as Shiretoko's Hokkaido bears; if the narrow 14 kilometre wide peninsula of Shiretoko were sea (this bit doesn't make sense or if Great Sandy Strait didn't make Fraser Island an island; if the geological origins of both estates were ignored, then there are many similarities between both World Heritage areas that need to be considered.

**Geography and isolation:** Both sites are elongated landmasses. Shiretoko is about 50 kilometres long with an average width of 12-14 kms while Fraser Island is 120 kms long and an average 12 kms wide. Both are of significant size. Fraser Island covers 165,000 ha (terrestrial area only) while Shiretoko World Heritage area (including the marine component contains 71,000 ha. Both sites are surrounded on three sides by open sea. The difference is that whereas Fraser Island has the fourth side defined by the narrow shallow Great Sandy Strait, Shiretoko is physically part of the main island of Hokkaido with the peninsula being about 15 kilometres wide at the base which is the site boundary. However access across these boundaries is about equivalent in terms of degree of difficulty. This results in both having relative isolation that allows increasing wilderness values at their far extremities.

**The marine components:** Both World Heritage sites have adjoining marine parks. Both have an important fishery components of economic significance although on Fraser Island the main stakeholders are amateur fishers whereas the commercial fishers harvest the very productive seas around Shiretoko in what appears to be an operation to rival the whole fishing fleet of Queensland. Both are also blessed with unusual assemblages of marine creatures. Fraser Island's feature marine creatures are mainly humpback whales, dugong, dolphins and turtles. Shiretoko has sperm and killer whales, (the latter in prodigious numbers) seals, sea lions and sea otters. There are inferred traditional rights asserted by fishers that need to be taken into account in management.

**Problems with the top predator:** Perhaps the most remarkable comparison between the two is how the top predators are managed. Shiretoko has the largest population of Hokkaido Brown Bears in Japan. These present a risk to humans, particularly if humans habituate them by feeding or are

careless in their lack of respect for these large wild animals. There can be little said that is different to the interactions between Fraser Island dingoes and humans. To minimize unwanted threats from bears, Shiretoko has erected fences to exclude bears from the major settlements just as Fraser Island has fences around its settlements and campgrounds. Bears are also excluded from the Shiretoko-goko elevated boardwalks by electric fences. Shiretoko's potential problems of bear-attacks has also allowed other management practices to be modified to limit other impacts. For example, guides must accompany groups during the months when bears pose the greatest risk to human safety. That results in better supervision of the visitor behaviour. It also reduces visitor numbers from the 500,000 that once did this walk annually to a maximum of 300 per day with guides. This has had many beneficial effects on visitor impact. It has also been able to better direct the flow of pedestrian traffic. Most of Shiretoko's 2.4 million visitors traverse only the Shiretoko Pass. Most visitors who go into the Shiretoko-goko lakes, the most popular feature off the main road, are content to walk on the bear-proof, elevated board walk.

**Other visitor management problems:** Shiretoko's major feral fauna problem is dealing with raccoons that seem as difficult to eradicate as feral cats on Fraser Island. There is a problem of over-population of deer but this is being addressed by a culling program introduced by the Shiretoko Nature Foundation (SNF). This non-government, not-for-profit group manages the World Heritage site and the National Park for the Japanese Ministry for Environment. It seems that SNF is mainly a contractor that has to have plans and policy first approved and then funded by the Ministry for Environment although it raises significant funds also from the community and its enterprises within the park such as retail of souvenirs.

**Weeds and other problems:** While there was no direct evidence of weeding programs, there was a very strong emphasis on quarantine. It wasn't washing down vehicles that was the focus but on footwear. There was a disinfected mat outside every Visitor Centre that people had to stand on, and a requirement to wash and brush boots clean before walking on any of the trails. There were also clear signs in Japanese and English warning of the potential impacts of stowaway seeds. This had the effect of heightening consciousness of weeds.

**Cooperative management and volunteers:** The main problem Shiretoko has is that the mixed forest in some of the core area was cleared for agriculture before being abandoned. There is a massive job to reforest this area and this is being progressively done with the aid of volunteers recruited by the SNF to work through the summer months. The earlier plantations look quite like commercial single species plantings but this is now being addressed in the style used in Australian bush and rainforest regeneration.

**Visitor Facilities:** As well as a well located Nature Centre on the junction of the Shiretoko Pass and the Shiretoko-goko branch road, Shiretoko has two very well located World Heritage Visitor Centres in the two towns on each side of the Peninsula that provide the main access, Otoro and Rausu. All of these buildings were provided by the Ministry of Environment. Additionally there are other facilities inside the park including a restaurant at Shiretoko-goko and another in association with the Nature Centre.