

# Fraser Island: A personal view of ‘presenting’ World Heritage

John Sinclair

Few people in Australia have had a longer or more intimate association with a World Heritage site as I have experienced. I have been engaged with Fraser Island since 1971 when the Fraser Island Defenders’ Organisation (FIDO) launched its campaign to have the Island’s outstanding natural values recognised and protected. It was a year before the UNESCO World Heritage Convention came into being and a decade before any of the great natural sites around the globe were inscribed on the World Heritage List.

Since 1971, I have been privileged to see more than 100 World Heritage sites in five continents and averaged visiting more than ten World Heritage sites annually over the past 25 years. In my view Fraser Island does not stand up well on site branding and presentation compared with most of these sites.

Fraser Island does not have a visitor centre, and I have never seen even the brass plaque marking Fraser Island’s inscription. Although there is information on the Queensland government’s World Heritage website on Fraser’s Outstanding Universal Value (OUV) (NPRSR, 2013a), the main site for visitation of the island has very limited mention of OUV qualities (NPRSR, 2013b). Once on the island the information on the status and importance of Fraser is inadequate. Apart from the few interpretive sign shelters located at some of the most visited sites on the island the nearest anything comes to interpreting the World Heritage values of the island are a series of faded panels on the outside of an old shed.

Some starts have been made to address this issue. A subcommittee of the Community Advisory Committee (CAC) was established to advance the concept of establishing a Fraser Island World Heritage Visitor Centre three years ago. However, it did not proceed because of the failure to secure Commonwealth funding to underwrite the process. A strategy to develop a much needed visitor centre has yet to emerge.

Most of the interpretation panels on Fraser Island address a wide range of management issues such as dingoes and tourist information, but lack specific references and information to communicate to visitors the island’s World Heritage status and OUV. The Queensland Government hoped to upgrade the jaded signage around the shed with Caring for Country application for a \$450,000 grant to develop an



Eli Creek Fraser Island – the boardwalk protects the fragile banks from erosion.  
Photo © Shannon Muir, Commonwealth of Australia (DSEWPaC)



Lake McKenzie: The extraordinary beauty of freshwater lakes perched high in the dunes is a key part of Fraser's World Heritage value. Photo © Paul Candlin, Commonwealth of Australia (DSEWPaC)

interpretation plaza at Central Station. However, to date, this application has not been successful.

In September 2011, I was nominated for a committee to review the transmission of interpretation of World Heritage values on Fraser Island. However the committee has lacked staff and the review has not commenced. While this was a good sign, there has been no follow up to indicate that the presentation of Fraser Island's World Heritage OUV is a priority. One needs to constantly remember that this obligation to present the value of the site is our obligation under the Convention.

My concerns go beyond the lack of priority for the presentation of Fraser Island as a World Heritage site to concern about the level of understanding and protection given to the OUV that resulted in Fraser Island's

inscription on the World Heritage list in the first place.

This is epitomised to me by what happened to Lake McKenzie (Boorangoora), a beautiful crystal clear lake perched high in the dunes which is one of the best known symbols of Fraser Island's outstanding natural beauty. Concern for high utilization and erosion on Lake McKenzie's pure white beach led to the Queensland Parks and Wildlife Service (QPWS) instigating beautification and "environmental protection" work which amounted to fencing off large sections of its famous white beach to establish a garden of native plants.

This project was aimed at addressing erosion, but resulted in an aesthetically intrusive fencing. In my view this project lost sight of the aesthetic values for which Fraser Island was recognised. Fraser Island has been



recognized to meet World Heritage Criterion vii – “(containing) *areas of exceptional natural beauty and aesthetic importance or contain superlative natural phenomena*” (UNESCO, 2013a) and the statement of OUV submitted by the Australian Government refers to Fraser Island containing “*half of the world’s perched freshwater dune lakes occur on the island, producing a spectacular and varied landscape*” (UNESCO, 2013b). Fortunately, a more sensitive approach has now been adopted. The offending structures have been removed and the QPWS has endorsed a photo monitoring project of the beach usage to determine impacts and to shape any future management decisions here.

Similarly the Statement of OUV refers to Fraser Island containing “*more than 40 kilometres of strikingly coloured sand cliffs*” (UNESCO, 2013b). This distinctive feature of the island was inadequately considered when

the managers established a most unnatural plantation of casuarinas and a row of bollards on the beach in front of the Pinnacles, one of the most spectacular displays of coloured sands. This was done to prevent vehicles getting too close to the coloured sands and to restrict pedestrians to a contained access.

This plantation has the effect of making it more difficult to see an open panorama of these coloured sands and as the plantation grew the view of this feature was dramatically reduced. However the dynamic nature of the beach and the alluvial plume on which these capital works were established has been subject to constant erosion since it was established. Slowly beach erosion has whittled away the plantation, but instead of removing the ineffective and visually offensive bollards they have been regularly realigned to the new erosion front. The interpretation at this site makes no mention of

Fraser Island's coloured sands cliffs being part of the island's OUV.

My key point is that we need to break down the OUV into key components (see Day and Figgis chapters) and really understand and consider them in management decisions. The lack of this deep understanding can lead to a lack of sensitivity and inappropriate choices of management actions and modifications of the site.

A last example of where management has not reflected proper understanding of Fraser Island's OUV is the continued use of roads in sensitive areas. Erosion means large volumes of sand are dislodged for every visitor to Fraser Island which is then washed down slope in heavy downpours. This high erosion factor is transforming the geomorphology to the extent that some road cuttings are now four metres deep. As a result some areas including Yidney Lake have filled with sediment washed off adjacent roads and is now growing a forest of Eucalypts rather than being a functioning wetland. This illustrates how fragile the islands unique lakes are and how susceptible they are to disturbance. A QPWS monitoring project showed that run-off from the access road to Lake McKenzie (Boorangoora) deposited 75 mm of sediment around monitoring pole on the edge of the lake between 28 November 2012 and 13 March 2013. The road also funnelled water from outside the catchment into the lake. Roads should be very limited and avoid areas adjacent to such sensitive sites.

All these examples illustrate that there is an inseparable nexus between how well the OUV of a World Heritage site is understood and presented, and how well the site

is managed. When Fraser Island loses one of its famous perched dune lakes through sedimentation, in my view, it is because of under appreciation that the lakes are a critical component of the OUV; when people misguidedly begin to interfere and 'improve' on a key beauty area, it means under appreciation of how untouched beauty is central to Fraser Island's inscription; when managers fail to understand the natural geomorphological processes that are an integral part of the OUV and use inappropriate management tools; it all illustrates that OUV is not just being inadequately communicated to the visiting public, but also to those entrusted with protecting World Heritage. My article on Japan's Shiretoko World Heritage Area describes an example of good presentation of OUV (Sinclair, 2012).

My concern about Fraser Island's OUV and its presentation is not new and nor is it political - I have raised these issues with many governments. It was documented in my 2011 paper "What has World Heritage meant for Fraser Island" citing the degradation (Sinclair, 2011).

There is now a higher priority being given by the many stakeholder groups through the Advisory Committees to improve the presentation of Fraser Island's OUV. Both the State and Federal Ministers made positive contributions at the 2012 World Heritage Symposium. Given the support from the public and tourist industry, it is now time to make new efforts to honour the Convention and really communicate the values, and make sustaining the OUV the central goal of all management for the Fraser Island World Heritage site.

Plantings at the base of the stark coloured cliffs of Fraser Island impede the view of their sculptural qualities. Photo © John Sinclair



## References

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## Biography

John Sinclair has been the Fraser Island Defenders Organisation's chief campaigner and advocate for over 41 years. He was actively engaged in the campaign to protect the Great Sandy Region back in 1974. He developed a World Heritage nomination for the region in 1984 but then had to wait another eight years to see just Fraser Island eventually inscribed. He was named "Australian of the Year" for 1976 for his leading role in protecting Fraser Island. In 1990 he was honoured by the United Nations Environment Program by being named in the Global 500. He was awarded the prestigious international Goldman Environmental Prize in 1993.

He has continued to monitor the effectiveness of efforts to protect the Outstanding Universal Value of Fraser Island ever since. This includes spending weeks leading voluntary weeding programs. John's interest in World Heritage extends far beyond Fraser Island. For 25 years he operated a safari business that was focused on taking ecotourists to all of Australia's World Heritage sites except for Macquarie Island. He has also visited more than 100 World Heritage sites in five continents.

The author John Sinclair at Yidney Lake now filled with silt from erosion.  
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