



## fact file

# Fraser Island Snapshot

**QUEENSLAND:** Stretching more than 123 kilometres along the southern coast of Queensland, Fraser Island (184,000 hectares) is the largest sand island in the world, and was inscribed onto the World Heritage List: "in recognition of its natural values as an outstanding example representing significant ongoing ecological and biological processes and as an example of superlative natural phenomena".

The island is a place of exceptional beauty, with long, uninterrupted white beaches flanked by strikingly coloured sand cliffs; majestic tall rainforests and numerous freshwater lakes filled with gin-coloured waters. The massive sand deposits which make up the island are a continuous record of climatic and sea level changes over the last 700,000 years.

Fraser Island features complex dune systems which are still evolving, and the array of dune lakes is exceptional in terms of number, diversity and age. The highest dunes on the island reach up to 240 metres above sea level.

Forty perched dune lakes, including the world's largest - Lake Boomanjin - and the much photographed Lake McKenzie, can be found on island. These lakes are formed when organic matter, such as leaves, bark and dead plants, gradually builds up and hardens in depressions created by the wind on top of the dunes.

The island also has *barrage lakes*, which form when moving sand dunes block a watercourse, and *window lakes* which form when a depression in the sand exposes part of the regional water table.

A surprising variety of vegetation types grow on the island, ranging from coastal heath to subtropical rainforests. It is the only place in the world where tall rainforests are found growing on sand dunes at elevations of over 200 metres.

The low *wallum* heaths on the island are of particular evolutionary and ecological significance and provide magnificent wildflower displays in spring and summer.

Birds are the most abundant form of animal life seen on the island. More than 350 migratory and coastal species of birds have been recorded.

It is a particularly important site for migratory wading birds which use the area as a resting place during their long flights between southern Australia and their breeding grounds in Siberia.



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Few mammal species are present on the island. The most common are bats, particularly flying foxes. The dingo population on the island is regarded as the most pure strain of dingoes remaining in eastern Australia.

The lakes on Fraser Island provide poor habitats for fish and other aquatic species because of the purity, acidity and low nutrient levels of the water. The appropriately named *Acid Frog* species have adapted to tolerate the acidic condition characteristic of the lakes and swamps on Fraser Island.

Since Fraser Island was World Heritage-listed, a complex system of peat swamps, generally known as patterned fens, has been identified along the western coast. These patterned fens occur almost at sea level and in places merge with mangrove areas near the sea.

Fraser Island has string fens found elsewhere as well as what is believed to be the only Reticulated (leopard) Patterned Fens in the world. Both are found side-by-side near Moon Point.

Other areas which have these *leopard* patterns are bogs not fens. (A bog is self growing in its own water supply and a fen has water flowing through from one side to the other).

Other patterned fens in the world are found in high altitudes and latitudes (Scotland, Siberia, Scandinavia, Canada and alpine regions of New Zealand) and were thought to have been formed by snow and ice.

This theory has been *blown out the water* by the discovery of patterned fens on Fraser Island. These patterned fens could be some of the oldest in the world, possibly 6,000 years old. They are found near Wathumba, Bogimbah and Wanggoolba Creeks, Ungowa and Moon Point.

A research programme to categorise and classify the fens of Fraser Island is being put in place by the Commonwealth World Heritage Unit, the Queensland Department of Environment and Heritage, the Australian Marine Conservation Society, the Queensland Museum and the International Mire Conservation Group.

Called K'gari by its Aboriginal inhabitants, the island shows evidence of Aboriginal occupation of at least 5,000 years, although it is possible that further archaeological work may reveal evidence of earlier occupation (with some reports estimated up to 20,000 years).

Early European reports indicat that Fraser Island was heavily populated by Aboriginal



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people, but subsequent research suggests that there was a small permanent population of 400-600 which swelled seasonally to perhaps 2,000-3,000 in the winter months, when seafood resources were particularly abundant.

Today, Fraser Island contains many sites of archaeological, social and spiritual significance. Middens, artifact scatters, fish traps, scarred trees and camp sites bear witness to the lives of the original inhabitants.

Early European contact, initiated by Matthew Flinders in 1802, was sporadic and limited to explorers, escaped convicts and shipwreck survivors. In 1836, a number of survivors of the shipwrecked *Stirling Castle* lived for about six weeks on the island before being rescued. During these six weeks, hostility and aggression developed between the Europeans and the Aborigines. One of the survivors was Eliza Fraser, the wife of the captain of the *Stirling Castle*, Captain James Fraser, after whom Europeans named the island.

Day-to-day management of the island is primarily the responsibility of the Department of Environment and Heritage through the Queensland Parks and Wildlife Service. In October 2014, The Federal Court of Australia conducted a special on-country sitting at Kingfisher Bay to award Native Title over the land and waters of Fraser Island to the traditional owners of the land - The Butchulla.

More than 400 Butchulla people from Hervey Bay and surrounding areas were in attendance as Federal Court Justice Berna Collier gave out copies of the native title determination to Elders during the event. Traditional music and dance demonstrations took place near a campfire; kids celebrated on the beach; and the smell of the smoke from the ceremonial smoking ceremony added to the atmosphere which really was quite remarkable.

This decision is a significant achievement for all of the local Butchulla people who have worked for many years to be recognised as traditional owners of K'Gari, as the island is known to them. This ruling allows the Butchulla people to hunt, fish and camp on the island as well as conduct traditional ceremonies (but doesn't affect existing rights on the island in terms of freehold land, National Parks and conducting tours).

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