

**Review Steering Committee  
Report on the Ecosure Pty Ltd Review of the  
*Fraser Island Dingo Management Strategy*  
(December 2012)**



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## **Preamble**

In this report we, as the Review Steering Committee, provide a standard peer review of the Ecosure Pty Ltd report on the Fraser Island Dingo Management Strategy (FIDMS) with respect to scientific accuracy and interpretation. Further, we highlight particular issues and recommendations raised in the report that we believe are most important to draw to the attention of the Minister for Environment and Heritage Protection, and we make some general observations.

In accordance with the terms of reference for the FIDMS review, the role of the Review Steering Committee is to report to the Minister for Environment and Heritage Protection and undertake the following tasks:

- Monitor, review and evaluate the work of the consultant, Ecosure;
- Provide an independent point of contact for the consultant to discuss issues relating to the review;
- Provide a conduit to the wider community for consultation on the review; and
- Provide comment on the proposed revisions for the FIDMS.

It is not our job to repeat Ecosure's report. Instead we would like to draw attention to issues and recommendations that we believe to be more urgent and/or pertinent for the Minister's consideration.

While our role was portrayed as an independent scientific peer review panel, our role was adapted from the traditional concept of scientific peer review. We have however, been able to maintain an independence of both the government and participants and commend the Minister for adopting this approach. Ultimately, while much of this report is similar to a scientific peer review, we played a broader role by providing general advice to Ecosure on process by which they compiled their report and some details of analysis and interpretation during several meetings while the report was being assembled. This facilitated a more mature report and suite of recommendations to the Minister.

## **Peer-review comments**

### **Overall comments**

Overall, we believe that Ecosure has delivered a comprehensive and credible report. They have made the most of a very limited budget and disparate forms of data. The report achieves several goals:

- A careful analysis of different management actions according to five criteria – managing human risk; a sustainable dingo population; dingo wellbeing/welfare; a positive visitor experience; and resource efficiency.
- A brief review of existing knowledge.
- Analysis of existing actions that need modification or completion, as well as alternative proposals.
- A simplified table of recommended actions for inclusion in a new FIDMS.

### **Report strengths**

- Good analysis of the sequence of events leading to the dingo becoming a problem animal on Fraser Island.
- Discussion about strengths and weaknesses of current dingo communication strategy.
- Recommendations regarding the need for more autonomy of QPWS regional staff in order to remain responsive to factors that may reduce risk of a harmful attack and / or enhance visitor experience to the World Heritage Area e.g. temporary campsite closures, and timely communication via traditional and social media.

### **Review limitations**

- The timeframe and scale of the review prevented broad consultation, in particular with interest groups such as tourism operators and the RSPCA. However, it is not the opinion of the Committee that broader consultation over a longer period of time would have fundamentally changed the review content and recommendations. Should government commission consultancy reviews in the future, it may wish to consider a bigger investment in consultation and the time required to undertake this process.
- By necessity, the Ecosure analysis of perception (via the Stakeholder Workshop and survey) was non-randomised and likely to have suffered from bias from special interest groups. Government should consider a randomized and stratified study of community attitudes regarding dingo management on Fraser Island in the future. The Ecosure report acknowledges this problem.

### **Trends of incidents and humane destructions**

There is weak evidence to suggest that the number of humane destructions of dingoes has decreased over time since 2002 inclusive. However, the annual number of humane destructions of dingoes is significantly higher in the last decade than prior to 2001.

### **Data management**

- The new FIDMS must pay significant attention to the recording, curation and dissemination of data. One of the key problems experienced by the consultants was the inability to access and compare data over time suggesting that the data needs to be standardized and stored in a way that eases access and analysis in the future. Much of this data should be publicly available for anyone to analyse and view, like all state government environmental data.
- A strength of the Ecosure report is that it makes such data publically available.
- The report also identifies a number of key data gaps, see below.

### **Data requirements**

Some data is essential for the future management of dingoes and people on Fraser Island:

- There is considerable uncertainty regarding how many dingoes exist on Fraser Island. More rigorous assessment of the number of dingoes on the island is needed, preferably by an ecologist using a scientifically designed

survey. The survey should be conducted at least annually with the same methodology. Such a survey is important to assess the absolute abundance and demographics of dingoes on Fraser Island, as well as the trend in dingo abundance and demographics over time. We recommend commissioning a qualified ecologist to undertake DNA capture-mark-recapture and camera trap studies.

- Assessment of health and welfare of dingoes over time, for example body condition and weight; with consideration to natural cycles such as whelping.
- Visitor assessment including number and demography, length and type of stay, country of origin and awareness of dingo issues.

### **Individual visitor fee**

We recommend that a visitor fee system for individuals be implemented to benefit data collection on visitors. This process would also enable the proper resourcing of island management activities and is in line with models being implemented in World Heritage Areas elsewhere (including the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park). A business model needs to be built around this concept, with the cost of the visitor fee enough to cover cost of implementing the fee and enhancing management on the island.

### **Clarity of FIDMS objectives**

The suite of objectives in the current FIDMS is not well structured and it gives inadequate attention to animal welfare. The FIDMS should have a hierarchical structure where objectives drive outcomes, and outcomes are achieved by actions. In a revised FIDMS, we believe there should be four fundamental objectives, each tempered by budget constraints:

- Ensure the conservation of a sustainable wild dingo population on Fraser Island.
  - Provide Fraser Island visitors with a safe, enjoyable opportunity to view dingoes in an environment as near as possible to their natural state.
  - Minimise the risk posed to humans by dingoes on Fraser Island.
  - Minimise adverse animal welfare impacts on dingoes caused by humans.
- All actions need to be evaluated against these four fundamental objectives and cost-effectiveness.

### **Specific comments on the final table of Ecosure recommendations (table 10):**

- a. Research and monitoring  
Research must be useful and driven by management needs and best available scientific practice (internal and external experts)
- b. Managing people –
  - i. Appropriate behavior in relation to dingoes  
We would like to emphasise that the draft community engagement plan be replaced by an updated Communications and Community Engagement Plan. Mixed messages must be eradicated.
  - ii. Management of human-dingo interaction  
We emphasise the recommendation to provide alternative fenced camping areas for use by tag-along tour groups and other actions that mitigate risks associated with this group e.g. toilet facilities, and an increased focus on visitor briefings

c. Managing dingoes –

i. Humane destructions

Information regarding humane destructions should be made available publicly on the department website. This should include protocols, details and history of dingoes destroyed and trends over time as well as contextual information on dingo mortality from other causes.

d. Stakeholder consultation

We are broadly in agreement with this set of recommendations, however close attention needs to be paid to the TOR and reporting structure of the proposed Stakeholder Committee.

### **Alternative proposals**

We agree with Ecosure's suggested actions with respect to all alternative proposals. For further clarity, for the reasons outlined by Ecosure, we explicitly do not support supplementary feeding unless the viability of the population can be scientifically demonstrated to be compromised. On this same issue of food supply, we note that the task of understanding the prey base is large and complex and should not be considered a high priority.

### **Broad issues**

- Volunteers

There is enormous opportunity to leverage the support of volunteers in order to enhance the experience of visitors. To fully realize this potential will require investment; we note that steps have been made in this direction.

- Partnerships

There are many opportunities whereby Fraser Island can lead the state with regard to collaborative, long-term partnerships. For example the Fraser Island Natural Integrity Alliance which has been supporting QPWS in the delivery of activities on Fraser Island since 2005. It is also highly desirable that research activities are done in partnership with research agencies.

- Enforcement and compliance

Based on figure 21, there is a suggestion that enforcement has been in decline since 2008 and that this may be correlated with an increase in category C, D and E incidents during this time. It is suggested that there is a need to enhance education by increasing current levels of enforcement and compliance. We further support increasing the capacity of rangers to conduct enforcement (which is currently underway).

- Perception

There is a perception by visitors to the island that they will see and/or interact with a dingo during their visit to the World Heritage Area. This in part appears to be driven by the tourism industry itself who have identified the dingo as an icon for Fraser Island with it widely promoted on websites and promotional signage / brochures etc. It is suggested that the tourism industry be encouraged to take a more balanced approach to native fauna on the island and reduce the expectation of visitors seeing a dingo during their visit.

### **Internationalisation and research dissemination**

Much could be gained in dealing with dingoes on Fraser Island from adopting an international perspective with regard to human-wildlife interactions. The limited scope of this report did not allow for this broader perspective. This issue applies to many aspects of environmental management and policy in Queensland. Queensland is not an intellectual island. We also reinforce the statement in section 3.6 of the Ecosure report promoting publication of peer-reviewed dingo research and management strategies from Fraser Island.

### **Concluding remarks**

We note that the Queensland Government has received extremely good value for money in the FIDMS review process. A fully-costed report such as that produced by Ecosure would normally be about twice the amount paid, and the cost of the steering committee's time (\$0) is significantly below the valued cost (approximately \$60,000).

Finally we commend the Minister for pushing forward rapidly with a more independent process for this contentious issue. In general, Queensland's state environment departments have been unwilling to open themselves up to independent scrutiny. We see this as an important step in improving Queensland's environment departments and the general public's perception of their performance<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> We use the generic term "environment departments" as there are currently several state government departments involved in environmental issues. They change frequently in coverage of issues and number. Our comments are quite general and not specific to any one of these departments, past or present.