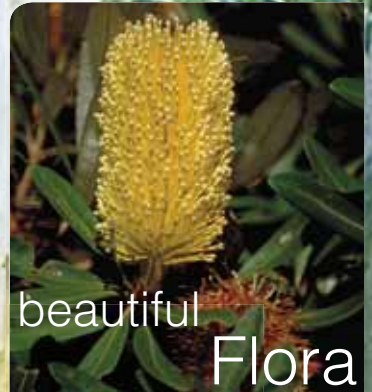


# Strategic Directions

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## for Cooloola



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## Introduction

This paper outlines strategic directions to provide a sustainable future for the Cooloola area. For the purposes of this paper, the area comprises the Cooloola section of the Great Sandy National Park, the Inskip Point Recreation Area and Noosa North Shore.

The 60,000ha Cooloola section of the Great Sandy National Park, located between Noosa North Shore and Rainbow Beach, is the largest remnant of coastal vegetation on the southern Queensland mainland. It is essentially a sand environment, with some 65km of trafficable beach, offering nature appreciation, camping, fishing, water sports, bushwalking and sand-driving opportunities to its many visitors.

Although not part of the Great Sandy National Park, the Inskip Peninsula (Inskip Point) Recreation Area is managed by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) under the *Recreation Areas Management Act 2006* (RAM Act) as part of the greater Cooloola area.

Increasing recreational pressure over recent years has led to concern about environmental damage, public safety and visitor expectation, prompting a review of management options to ensure protection of Cooloola's unique values while maintaining a sustainable level of recreation and commercial opportunities.

# Strategic Directions

# Cooloola's values

## Natural

The Cooloola area shares many of the same outstanding values as neighbouring Fraser Island, which was inscribed on the list of World Heritage areas in 1992. Cooloola was originally included in the 1991 Fraser Island nomination for World Heritage listing but was not accepted under the criteria as they existed at that time.

Cooloola is an extension of Fraser Island's coastal sand system and the natural values associated with this landscape. It also has more than one third of the Noosa River catchment within its boundary, a wild area that includes tidal, brackish and fresh water lakes, with surrounding wetlands that are a nursery for juvenile fish. The Noosa River's inclusion within the Great Sandy National Park has ensured its excellent water quality.

Cooloola and Fraser Island present the world's oldest coastal dune formation story. Here, eight overlapping layers of dunes represent a history spanning more than 700,000 years. Cooloola features spectacular sand dunes and the undisturbed headwaters of the Noosa River. Its fascinating landscape showcases superlative natural phenomena and areas of natural beauty through long beaches backed by high dunes, open heath splashed with colourful wildflowers, mangroves, woodlands of banksia and scribbly gum, shady blackbutt forests, rainforests with towering trees, and tranquil lakes and waterways.

As one of the most complete coastal dune systems in the world Cooloola is an outstanding example representing the major stages of the earth's history. It is also an outstanding example of significant ongoing ecological and biological processes, as within its sandy ecosystem life is evolving in a low nutrient, acidic, sandy environment, providing a haven for large numbers of different life forms, including many rare and endangered species.

Although the Inskip Point Recreation Area is only 459ha, its natural values are wide ranging. Its unique aesthetic qualities provide a surf beach to the east, the calm waters of the Great Sandy Strait to the west and largely uninterrupted views to Fraser Island. The area supports a variety of vegetation including mangroves, casuarinas, paperbark and scribbly gum woodlands, mallee brush box forest and cypress forest. This vegetation provides habitat for a variety of animals including 112 bird species. Rare and threatened species inhabit the area, which is also a roosting site for migratory birds protected under international conventions.

## Cultural heritage

Archaeological work in the region has identified that Indigenous people have lived and used the area for more than 6000 years. The Traditional Owners Gubbi Gubbi, Kabi Kabi and Butchulla people believe their connection goes back further to the time of dreaming.

A diverse range of archaeological sites have been found, with many of these recorded as being of Indigenous significance.

The first record of the Great Sandy region is from Lieutenant James Cook's discovery voyage of Australia's east coast in 1770. The area remained largely unexplored by European settlers until 1842, when pioneers were attracted by good pastoral lands and excellent forests.

Logging of valuable kauri pines began at Cooloola in 1866. After the Gympie gold rush of 1867, demand for timber boomed and logging expanded to become the region's major industry for more than a century. Small-scale mining for heavy minerals and sand occurred during the 1960s and 1970s and attracted opposition from conservation-minded individuals and community groups. Conservation efforts eventually ended sandmining in the Great Sandy region in 1976 and logging stopped in late 1991.

## Recreational

Recreation opportunities range from regionally significant urban-social experiences of townships and resorts, to the solitary natural experiences of the beaches, forests, lakes and river.

The outstanding natural features provide a variety of nature-based recreation opportunities, including fishing, surfing, swimming, four-wheel driving, bushwalking, camping, nature appreciation, hang gliding, canoeing, kayaking and photography. In addition, the area provides excellent opportunities for scientific research, as well as education and interpretive activities.



Established and maintained roads, walking tracks, beaches and waterways provide access to Cooloola's recreational opportunities and natural attractions. Access is possible through conventional and/or four-wheel drive vehicles, water craft and by walking. Commercial day tours using four-wheel drive vehicles and buses run from Brisbane, Noosa, other Sunshine Coast centres and Rainbow Beach. Tour boats operate daily from Noosa and Tewantin. Vehicles, canoes and motorboats may be hired from surrounding townships.

In the northern section of Cooloola a varying degree of day-use facilities are provided including those at Freshwater, Bymien, Searys Creek and Red Canyon. In southern Cooloola day-use areas are located at Harrys Hut on the Noosa River, Elanda Point and Fig Tree Point on Fig Tree Lake.

There are 19 walking tracks available that offer a diverse choice of opportunity and cater to varying experience and fitness levels.

These range from a 300m self-guiding mangrove circuit, the 600m track to Carlo Sandblow near Rainbow Beach, the 2.7km Freshwater Lake circuit, the more trying 10.2km Elanda to Fig Tree Point trail, to the 46.2km Cooloola Wilderness Trail for serious hikers.

Campers are also well catered for in Cooloola. There are designated campgrounds at Inskip Point, Poverty Point, Freshwater, Harrys Hut, and several canoe-based locations on the upper Noosa River and along the Cooloola Wilderness Trail. Beach camping is provided along a 15km stretch of ocean beach south of Little Freshwater Creek.

## Economic

Commercial tourism and fishing within the Great Sandy Region are important to the local economy. These industries provide direct and indirect employment throughout the region. The recreational activities of free and independent tourists taking part in fishing, camping and four-wheel driving also generate significant economic benefits for the area.

## Existing situation

Although the majority of the Cooloola area is national park tenure, the land from Rainbow Beach north, including Inskip Point, is a mixture of reserve, unallocated state land and special leases. The Noosa North Shore contains council land, national park and freehold. The Teewah township is freehold and reserve land within the national park. The beach south from Double Island Point is national park above the high water mark and reserve between high and low water marks. The Great Sandy Marine Park incorporates the beach from Double Island Point north, including Inskip Point and the Great Sandy Straits.

Actual visitor numbers are difficult to ascertain. Records from the Noosa River barge operator show there were 184,157 vehicle crossings in 1999/2000 and 249,021 in 2003/2004. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) records indicate 144,000 camper nights in the beach camping zone for the 2006 calendar year, anecdotally a significant increase on numbers in 2000. For each of the Easter periods in 2006 and 2007, the beach zone hosted camper numbers close to 3000 per night. The area is also immensely popular as a destination for day visitors from both northern and southern approaches.

The Inskip Point Recreation Area also provides unique recreation opportunities where visitors can enjoy a natural coastal environment with limited development, facilities and organised activities. The area receives about 41,000 visitors each year and provides diverse camping opportunities ranging from developed camping with toilets to more natural areas with no facilities.



Over the past three years in the peak periods of Christmas–New Year, Easter and some long weekends, camping areas at Inskip Point, Freshwater and along Teewah Beach have been filled beyond capacity, adversely impacting on visitor experience and the natural and built infrastructure, leading to environmental damage and localised social disorder.

The 65km of beach from Noosa to Rainbow Beach, via either the Leisha track or the Freshwater track, is used all year round as a thoroughfare for traffic between those centres, and becomes particularly congested in the peak periods. Combined with the pedestrians also using the beach at those times, a significant public safety risk is created and there have been numerous incidents.

Inskip Point is a declared recreation area under the RAM Act and a management plan for this area is being developed. The recreation area was declared to better manage the growing recreational pressures on the area while protecting the vulnerable sand environment from the associated impacts.



In February 2006, following a particularly disruptive Christmas–New Year period, the Minister established a working group to consider options for management of camping at Inskip Point. The group recommended:

- that camper numbers be capped at 3000 for any one time
- that facilities be upgraded to accommodate that number
- that intensive compliance involving police be undertaken in peak periods
- that there be zoning for particular user expectations (e.g. dogs, fires, electricity generators, etc)
- that alternative management options be explored in conjunction with Gympie Regional Council.

In August 2006, in response to public concerns of beach safety and environmental damage, the Minister established another working group to look at recreational management issues along Teewah Beach. The group recommended:

- that Cooloola be declared a recreation area under the RAM Act, allowing different tenures to be managed under a single management regime
- that management of the RAM area on Noosa North Shore be undertaken by Noosa Council in partnership with the EPA
- that a speed limit of 50km/hr be set for the whole beach
- that sections of the beach be closed to vehicles to facilitate safe recreation and to protect wildlife
- that beach camping numbers be reduced and capped in accordance with the landscape classification system
- that additional camping capacity is established at Freshwater and at Noosa Council's Wilderness Camp.

## Consultation

In 2006 and 2007, in response to increasing visitation, the EPA completed \$1.2 million in visitor facility improvements, including:

- Freshwater campground and day-use area upgrade
- Freshwater Road realignment
- Inskip Point toilet and campground improvements
- new solar-powered bore and lighting at Freshwater
- Harrys Hut campground and day-use area redevelopment
- new Harrys Hut canoe launching ramp
- Bymien day-use area redevelopment
- new Double Island Point toilet
- Double Island Point access track upgrade
- new Teewah Beach camper service area.

The EPA is also leading a joint Queensland and Commonwealth government process to have the Fraser Island World Heritage Area extended to include Cooloola. Recently published reports reviewing the values of Cooloola provide a strong case to declare a World Heritage area to officially recognise it as an internationally unique ecosystem.

In 2003 the Noosa Council released the Noosa North Shore Management Plan outlining management directions for the area, which extends from Teewah village in the north to the Noosa River in the south. The plan is a conservation-based strategy aimed at promoting “the appropriate management of Noosa North Shore as a significant Regional Landscape Area”. The management plan identifies that increasing visitation to the area needs to be monitored and managed to ensure degradation is minimised and the area’s pristine reputation is maintained. Consistent with the findings of the working groups, the management plan identifies areas for beach closures to provide safe recreation opportunities for visitors and to protect migratory birds which feed and roost on the Noosa River mouth’s intertidal sand banks.



“Strategic Directions for Cooloola” was released for public comment in early 2008 and over 100 submissions were received. Most requested changes to the document, particularly with regard to the proposed speed limits, the proposed camping numbers, and the implementation of the Recreation Area proposal.

A number of submissions were also very supportive of the proposals.

“Strategic Directions for Cooloola” has been amended in a number of areas as a result of these submissions. Whilst the detail is included in ‘The Future’ section, the following major changes have been incorporated subsequent to the consultation:

- Restriction of the 50 km/h speed limit to areas adjacent to camping or other high recreational use areas,
- 80 km/h speed limits in other areas,
- Beach closures only in front of the Inskip Camping areas, the camping area between First and Third cutting at Noosa North Shore, and a small beach on the north side of Double Island Point,
- Increases in proposed camping limits on Cooloola to 2,000, 1200, and 600 on peak, shoulder and off season times respectively, and
- A phased in requirement for self contained sewage systems for all beach campers on Cooloola Beach.

## The future

### 1. Land management

Sunshine Coast Regional Council has adopted the Noosa North Shore Management Strategy 2003 as a direction for management of the Noosa North Shore. This strategy should be implemented on lands up to a line between the third cutting and the Noosa River with management primarily with Sunshine Coast Regional Council.

The process of rationalising state land on the Noosa North Shore should proceed to an equitable outcome between Sunshine Coast Regional Council, the EPA and the Department of Natural Resources and Water.

As a minimum, lands north of the third cutting to Rainbow Beach, consisting mainly of the Cooloola section of Great Sandy National Park, excluding Teewah Village but including the beach and other lands controlled by Sunshine Coast and Gympie Regional Councils, should be declared a recreation area under the RAM Act and managed by the EPA. The EPA will commence the steps necessary to implement a recreation area over this and other areas as agreed with landholders.

A recreation area, declared under the RAM Act, will recognise the significant recreational use of the area and provide for a consistent management regime over multiple tenures. It enables co-ordinated natural resource and recreation management, facilitating appropriate visitor experience and conservation and protection of natural and cultural values.

Inskip Point is a declared recreation area and contains land which is Reserve and State land tenure, managed by the EPA. A management plan for Inskip Point is due for completion in 2008.

The RAM Act allows for fee collection via vehicle access permits and commercial permits on recreation areas, and it is proposed that these fees be applied to the proposed Cooloola Recreation Area to support infrastructure development and maintenance, and the higher level of management required. A Regulatory Impact Statement (RIS) will be prepared to assess the likely impact of declaring the recreation area.

It is proposed that fees will mirror those applied to Fraser Island, with a 20% discount for vehicle permits purchased for both recreation areas for the same period. The current fees for Fraser Island Recreation Area are:

- Camping - \$4.85 per person per night; \$19.40 per family per night
- Vehicle access permit - a term of 1 month or less \$37.10; a term of more than 1 month \$185.80.

It is important to note that the revenue raised from fees must be reinvested in the management of recreation areas in Queensland.

The declaration process, including the RIS, will involve stakeholder consultation, public scrutiny and negotiation with landowners before the proposal is submitted to Cabinet for approval. It is anticipated the recreation area could be declared in 2009.

## 2. *Vehicle management*

The beaches between Noosa and Rainbow Beach and at Inskip Point carry significant vehicle traffic for day use and camping. The interaction of vehicles and pedestrians, particularly in the camping zones, but along the whole beach generally, creates safety issues.

A reduced speed limit adjacent to the Teewah Beach camping zone was implemented quickly due to the public safety risk and has been successful in reducing the number of incidents in this area.

EPA will seek support from the relevant Authorities for declaration of the following speed limits on the beach area:

- 50km/h from river mouth to Teewah Township ;
- 80km/h from Teewah Township to start of camping zone ;
- 50km/h from start of camping zone to Freshwater
- 80km/h from Freshwater to Leisha Track ;
- 50km/h from Leisha Track to Double Island Point ;
- 80km/h from Leisha track to Rainbow Beach

The beach is currently controlled by Sunshine Coast and Gympie Regional Councils and the Department of Transport, with normal road rules applying. A recreation area declaration will provide enhanced management of the inter-tidal area.

It is proposed that vehicle access to beaches will be restricted at Inskip Point adjacent to the Camping Area, at Cooloola Beach between First and Third Cutting, and on the last small beach on the north side of Double Island Point to provide protection for shorebirds and enhanced safety for people using this area.

That part of the beach at Inskip Point necessary to facilitate barge access to Fraser Island will remain accessible to vehicles.

## 3. *Camping management*

The management of camper numbers at the various sites throughout Cooloola is necessary to provide a high-quality visitor experience, to protect natural values and to prevent pollution and erosion.

- At Inskip Point current total numbers will be accommodated, up to 3000 per night for short peak periods at Christmas and Easter and up to 1800 per night for the majority of the year.

The Inskip Point management plan will recommend the development of a visitor management strategy, which will include investigating potential new camping sites in the area.

- The 15km camping zone on Teewah Beach will be managed for three seasonal considerations, allowing 2000 per night in peak season (Xmas and Easter), 1200 per night in shoulder holiday season and 600 per night in off season.
- The Freshwater campground will be expanded to cater for an additional 100 campers per night in peak times
- The Sunshine Coast Regional Council camping area on Noosa north shore is likely to be expanded significantly following a state land rationalisation process currently underway and will provide significant additional camping capacity .



Additionally, all beach campers will be required to carry portable toilets from September 2009. Consideration will also be given to the provision of improved sewage removal services.

The current and predicted continued popularity of camping in Cooloola will maintain pressure on camping areas and related management and maintenance. The high volume of campers create an opportunity to explore commercial options for camping facilities in the future, particularly at Inskip Point and Freshwater.

#### 4. *Bird protection*

Studies on the Noosa North Shore have identified a number of migratory bird species which use the intertidal sandbanks at the river mouth for feeding and roosting during their stay in Australia from September to April each year. In March/April the birds migrate to Siberia to breed, returning to Australia in September/October. The time they spend in Australia is essential to build their energy reserves to enable their journey north each year. If disturbed during this time the risk of the birds not surviving their journey increases. Vehicle access to this area will be managed by the Noosa North Shore Management Strategy.

Inskip Point is a significant habitat for the endangered black-breasted button-quail and the vulnerable beach stone-curlew. The area is also a major feeding and roosting ground for many significant wader birds, making the recreation area subject to two international conventions, the China-Australia Migratory Bird Agreement (CAMBA) and the Japan-Australia Migratory Bird Agreement (JAMBA).

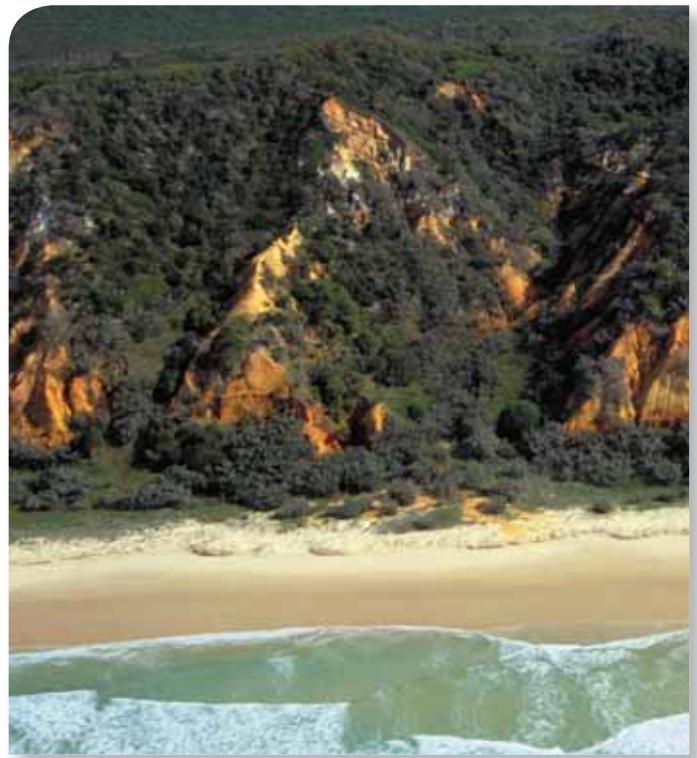
Vehicle exclusion from bird feeding and roosting sites in the Inskip area will be considered as part of the overall vehicle management strategy.

#### 5. *Water quality protection*

The origins of the Noosa River begin in the Cooloola section of the Great Sandy National Park. This unique situation greatly reduces the risk of the river system's water quality becoming degraded. It is essential that management of the proposed recreation area ensures the ongoing high water quality of the Noosa River and protection of the diverse ecosystem it supports.

#### 6. *Day-use management*

Cooloola is a very popular location for day visitors. Easy access from heavily populated south-east Queensland makes it a popular spot for activities such as fishing, picnicking, surfing or simply driving along the beach. Firm numbers of day visitors are difficult to record; however, they are believed to be considerable, especially during peak holiday periods. Accurate recording of day use needs to be undertaken, along with assessments of infrastructure requirements and visitor satisfaction.



#### 7. *Infrastructure development and maintenance*

A forward program of infrastructure management will be developed in conjunction with stakeholders to support recreation opportunity and conservation. The program will include maintenance and rationalisation considerations for existing infrastructure.

#### 8. *World Heritage area (WHA) listing*

The Queensland Government is progressing a nomination to extend the Fraser Island World Heritage Area to include the Cooloola section of the Great Sandy National Park and part of the Great Sandy Marine Park. A successful outcome to this process will provide due recognition to the values of Cooloola and enhance the area's appeal for tourism. With its proximity to major south-east Queensland population centres and connectivity to Fraser Island, it is reasonable to expect the interest of commercial operators and free and independent tourists in Cooloola to increase if World Heritage listing is successful.

The current project timeline will see the nomination submitted to the World Heritage Committee in early 2009.



