

Great Sandy Strait — A Wetland of International Significance

Great Sandy Strait (which includes Tin Can Bay) is a Wetland of International Significance. It was inscribed as Ramsar site 992 in 1999. Its 93,160 ha includes marine, estuarine and intertidal wetlands and salt pans. The intertidal wetland habitats consist of: 15,500 ha of mangrove forests, 12,300 ha of intertidal and subtidal seagrass beds, 2,800 ha of saltmarshes, unvegetated mud, sand and salt flats, and estuarine and channel waters of varying depth and width. The main freshwater wetland types are Melaleuca swamp forest and other palustrine wetlands. It is a very special place deserving the highest level of protection. The Draft Great Sandy Marine Park Zoning offered it little extra protection.

Located between the mainland and Fraser Island, Great Sandy Strait is a complex landscape with shifting patterns of mangroves, sandbanks, intertidal sand, mud islands, salt marshes, extensive sea grass beds and patterned fens. It is important habitat for breeding fish, crustaceans, dugongs, dolphins, marine turtles and migratory waders. It lies between the rapidly growing population centres of Hervey Bay and Tin Can Bay.

Great Sandy Strait is a double-ended sand passage estuary. It has large horizontal tide movements because of the relatively flat nearshore. Low water is one kilometre offshore in some areas.

The Strait is the largest area of tidal swamps within the South East Queensland bioregion. It is one of the few passage landscapes in Australia where an offshore barrier island has formed sufficiently close to the mainland to block the flow of a substantial river system. It creates a "double" estuary with a shifting pattern of mangroves, sand banks and mud islands. The soils are mostly fluvial sediments.

Patterned fens have been recorded along Great Sandy Strait and Cooloola. This type of wetland is unique in the world.

On the eastern side, freshwater swamps merge in many places with the mangroves. Large communities of mangrove invertebrates and fish are present throughout the wetland.

Waders: A wide range of migratory and resident waders, waterbirds and seabirds uses the area. Eighteen of the 24 migratory shorebird species listed under JAMBA and CAMBA use these wetlands. The area is recognized as among the most important roosting sites for migratory trans-equatorial shorebirds in Australia. Counts of up to 40,000 shorebirds have been recorded. It provides one of the most important roosting areas for migratory, trans-equatorial shorebirds in Australia. Waders use the expansive tidal flats intensively, especially near the seagrass beds. The area is also of importance for yearling birds, especially eastern curlews, which do not return to the northern hemisphere until the following year.

The rare little tern has been recorded in the area and the endangered beach stone curlews are residents.

Mangroves: The mangrove communities represent a transition between temperate and tropical regions. Ten species of mangrove have been identified. *Aegialitis annulata* and *Xylocarpus granatum* reach their southernmost limit here.

Turtles: All six species of marine turtles found in Queensland inhabit the strait. They are the green, hawksbill, flatback, Pacific Ridley, loggerhead and

leatherback turtles. The Great Sandy Strait is an important feeding ground for juvenile turtles.

Rare Butterflies: Old stands of grey mangrove support populations of the endangered Illidge's ant-blue butterfly.

Marine Mammals: Great Sandy Strait contains some recognized "hot spots" for the endangered dugong with high densities of these marine mammals dependent on the sea grass there. Three species of dolphins, the common dolphin, bottlenosed dolphin and the Indo-Pacific, hump-back dolphin, are resident in the area.

Fish and crabs: The area is extremely important for the protection of, and as a source of food for, juvenile and adult fish and crustaceans.

Seagrass: The seagrass beds contain six species. These areas act as nursery and feeding grounds for prawns and fish, and the feeding grounds for dugong and turtles.

Reefs: Coral reefs and "bommies" occur in shallow waters at the northern end of the Strait, at Big Woody Island, Little Woody Island and near Round Island. Spectacular sponges are found on coarse coral grit south of Little Woody Island. A huge artificial reef has also been created north of Big Woody Island.

Protection:

The Hervey Bay-Tin Can Bay Dugong Protection Area covers most of the Strait.

Protected areas within or adjacent to the Strait include Great Sandy National Park (Fraser Island and Cooloola), Poona National Park and Great Sandy Conservation Park.

Great Sandy is on the Register of the National Estate.

The eastern side of the Strait within 500 metres of Fraser, Dream and Stewart Islands is also part of the Fraser Island World Heritage Area.

Fisheries Habitat Reserves cover a large part of the strait.

There remains a question though as to whether this is enough protection. **Threats include:**

- ▮ Beam trawling continues to disturb the habitat;
- ▮ Increasing urbanization of the western shores;
- ▮ Increasing recreational fishing effort;
- ▮ Increasing recreational power boating resulting in lethal boat strikes of turtles and dugong;
- ▮ The recent establishment of pearl farms;
- ▮ Pressure to increase the amount of aquaculture;
- ▮ The continuing impact from the pine plantation on the mainland changing the pH and hydrology;
- ▮ Tidal Power: Industry wants to explore the possibility of generating electricity from the tidal flow between Fraser Island and Inskip Point.
- ▮ Marinas: More marinas are being sought.

Great Sandy Strait — A Heritage Waterway

The narrow shallow protected waterway separating Fraser Island from the mainland has a rich historical and cultural heritage which has been under-recognized

10,000 years ago Great Sandy Strait was the ancestral bed of the Mary River which was prevented flowing north through what is now Hervey Bay by a range of hills represented now by Woody Island. It was then (and is still) the traditional home of the Butchalla people. As the sea level rose filling Great Sandy Strait and diverting the Mary River, the Butchalla continued to occupy a land with a dramatically altered landscape.

There is some evidence that the first Europeans to visit the Strait may have been Portuguese navigators in the early 16th Century. However, when Captain Cook sailed past in 1770, he was too far out to recognize it.

In 1797 Matthew Flinders set out from Sydney specifically to explore Hervey Bay and Moreton Bay. He named a number of features on Fraser Island and marked on his chart, "Sandy Point" at what is now known as Moon Point, the northern extremity of the waterway. He wrote "low woody island" on what he named Curlew Island which is now known as Woody Island. He '*entertained a conjecture that the Head of Hervey's Bay might communicate with Wide Bay*', but was unable to prove his theory because of the shoals south of Woody Island.

In 1822, William Edwardson sailed through Great Sandy Strait. He had been sent by Governor Brisbane in the cutter "*Snapper*" to locate a river location suitable for a new penal settlement. He was frightened by Aborigines and quickly retreated. He failed to discover the Mary River and assumed that Tin Can Bay was a river. He described Great Sandy Strait as "*a safe and capacious anchorage*".

Escaped convicts from the Moreton Bay settlement visited and settled in the area between 1828 and 1842. They sought to avoid the tyranny of the penal life by living with the Aborigines. The best records of Aboriginal traditional life around Great Sandy Strait were provided by James Bracefell who spent years with the people around Great Sandy Strait.

In 1842, at the time of the closing of the Moreton Bay penal settlement, Andrew Petrie sailed through Great Sandy Strait. He camped for one night on Coorangur, now known as Stewart Island. He landed at North White Cliffs ("Balarrgan") where he recruited Aboriginal assistance to help him navigate into the Mary River. He reported on Fraser Island's superb timber resource. Petrie's exploration led to the settlements at Maryborough and along the Mary River and a growing shipping traffic through this heritage waterway developed in his wake. However, this European invasion did not initially intrude significantly into the Great Sandy Region and the lifestyles of the Aborigines until its timber began to be exploited in 1863.

The early loggers eagerly sought Kauri Pine (known to the Butchalla as "dundathu") that they formed up into huge rafts. The loggers used the tidal movements through the Strait and in the Mary River to reach Pettigrew's Mill at what is now Dundathu. Between 1873 and 1884, Pettigrew took timber from the Broutha Scrub to Poverty Point on the shores of Tin Can Bay. Logs were rafted up Tin Can

Bay and Great Sandy Strait to their mill that operated for about 50 years.

However in 1867, the discovery of gold at Gympie made Great Sandy Strait a major shipping channel as ships loaded with diggers dropped off their charges either in Maryborough or at North White Cliffs so that they could join the gold rush. This caused the Queensland Government to close down and take over the Aboriginal mission at North White Cliffs which had been established in 1871 by the Rev. Fuller and convert it to a Quarantine Station for these immigrants. Later when the rush was over they converted back to a short-lived government mission for Aborigines.

In 1897, Balarrgan was the site of the first land rights conflict between Aborigines and Europeans. Maryborough excursionists claimed that they were evicted on Good Friday while visiting the beach which had been "*a favourite resort for pleasure parties for over twenty years*" and a popular "*watering place since before Queensland got separation*". A public meeting in Maryborough on the topic drew 300 to 400 people and the resulting parochial pressures led to the Aboriginal mission being relocated to a less desirable site near the mouth of Bogimbah Creek.

The gold rush had though found a way for international shipping through Great Sandy Strait. The prevailing wind currents and ease of filling the ships with good fresh water at Waterspout Creek (South White Cliffs) enticed many clippers sailing back to England from Sydney and Melbourne via India (where they loaded up with tea) to use this sheltered waterway rather than going out to sea. As they filled up with water, they dropped off their ballast. There are piles of rocks on the Strait floor are evidence of this practice. However the sailors left worse behind. They left the Aborigines with venereal disease and an opium addiction which had a devastating impact of the Aboriginal culture.

In the 1890's, a gun was sited across the Great Sandy Strait from Balarrgan to repel potential Russian invaders who, it was feared, might attempt to sail up the Mary River.

In 1918, a sawmill was established by Hector McKenzie at Balarrgan. It operated until it became unfeasible. That was when wharf labourers insisted that only wharries from Maryborough could load timber on McKenzie's ships.

For the first half of the 20th century there was a thriving oyster industry based on harvesting the abundant oysters in the mangroves lining Great Sandy Strait. The township of Bingham at Mary River Heads was established solely for the oyster industry. There are records of the steamship "Moruya" calling to Great Sandy Strait every fortnight and filling its holds with bags of oysters from this very productive waterway. Due to problems with wharries it never actually stopped but moved very slowly while the oyster farmers drew aside and loaded their harvest aboard.

During the Second World War, one of Australia's most famous military commando units, Z Force, trained at Balarrgan, near the deteriorating McKenzie's Jetty. A number of relics from their training still remain.