

# K'gari (Fraser Island) Wongari (dingo) management FAQs

## Euthanising of K'gari wongari 17Blue17F

### Why was this particular wongari (dingo) euthanised?

The decision to euthanise an animal is not one that is taken lightly. Euthanasia is considered a last resort. When euthanising a high-risk, aggressive dingo it is selective, precise and conducted humanely.

In making this difficult decision, Queensland Parks and Wildlife Service (QPWS) have considered the views of the island's Traditional Owners, the Butchulla People, and alternative options to managing this risk, including the relocation of the animal.

This decision to euthanise the animal is in line with the Fraser Island Dingo Conservation and Risk Management Strategy and Implementation Plan and part of the department's commitment to ensuring the safety of everyone who visits the island.

The dingo's history presents a concerning pattern of negative interactions towards children and it has a record of 12 threatening interactions and five high-risk interactions. In the incident on December 7, the dingo bit an eight-year-old boy on the beachfront near Eurong, despite being in the presence of adults.

### Will this affect the population of wongari on K'gari?

The overall population and viability of dingoes on K'gari is not threatened by this action, research indicates the population is strong and healthy.

### If this wongari (17Blue17F) had shown aggressive behaviour in the past why wasn't more done sooner?

The management of wildlife is a complex matter. As a part of natural selection, a wongari's survival in the wild is determined by how well they interact with their environment and their stature within the natural hierarchical system. To succeed they need to be able to hone their key instinctive survival and dominance techniques, which we often see practised within packs and sometimes in interactions with humans.

In many cases, we observe dingoes who test their assertiveness through their learning phase, settle down and present with normal dingo behaviours, while others, particularly those that become habituated through inadvertent and deliberate feeding, can become more dominant and their behaviours can escalate to aggression. It can sometimes be a fine balance of exercising tolerance to natural learning processes versus recognising escalating high risk behaviours, which our dedicated expert staff are trained to observe.

### Were the Traditional Owners consulted when the decision was made to euthanise the animal?

Yes, the Traditional Owners of K'gari (Butchulla Aboriginal Corporation - BAC) were consulted. BAC are in constant discussion with QPWS in regard to wongari management. However, the decision to euthanise was made by QPWS.

## General euthanising

### How many wongari has the department euthanised in the past?

The euthanising of wongari is an infrequent event and only occurs in extenuating circumstances.

In 2001, following the death of a nine year old boy, an order was made to remove habituated dingoes and 32 were humanely destroyed. Over several years since that time, the average numbers of animals

ethanised for high risk behaviour averaged seven per year. In recent years, that average has reduced to about one or two per year, which demonstrates that the government's current strategies are effective.

### **Why does the department euthanise wongari?**

The decision to euthanise an animal is not one that is taken lightly and is only considered as a last resort. When undertaken it is selective, precise and humane.

In each instance, QPWS consider the wongari's history and severity of its incidents.

While the Fraser Island Dingo Conservation and Risk Management Strategy (FIDCRMS) aims to strike the right balance between dingo conservation and public safety, public safety is always going to be the number one priority in managing the wongari population on K'gari. Wongari behaviour is constantly monitored on K'gari to ensure animal and visitor safety. Those animals assessed as being high-risk and have displayed aggressive towards people may be euthanised.

### **What is a 'high-risk' wongari?**

High-risk wongari are highly habituated, heavily reliant upon human food, lack any wariness and have displayed aggressive or threatening behaviours towards people to ensure its dominance or access to human food.

This behaviour usually escalates, becomes more prevalent, displaying a dependence on aggressive, high-risk behaviour (growled or lunged at a person, or nipped or bitten someone) which is irreversible. Such behaviours cannot be 'unlearned'. Beyond the high risk posed to the public safety, high risk wongari have the demonstrated history to teach and encourage similar behaviours in other animals particularly any possible future offspring. These risks remain even if it is relocated.

### **Why isn't relocation of wongari considered instead of euthanising?**

The department has never relocated K'gari (Fraser Island) wongari to the 'wild' on the mainland and does not currently support any proposal to relocate Fraser Island dingoes to 'wild' or 'captive' situations on the mainland. This is based on the advice of prominent dingo ecologists, and a trial relocation in 1994 of three animals to the David Fleay Wildlife Park. The animals were continually stressed and depressed and remained high risk to keepers, and while one died from a tick bite, the other two had to be euthanised for humane reasons. Historical attempts to assimilate aggressive dingoes into captive environments and populations have proven to be detrimental to the relocated wongari's quality of life.

## **Be dingo safe**

### **If I am travelling to K'gari what can I do to keep myself, my family and the wongari safe?**

We encourage all visitors to K'gari to be dingo safe:

- Stay within arm's reach of your children
- Walk in groups – never run
- Camp in fenced areas where possible
- Secure all food - never feed dingoes
- Store food away from tents
- Secure all rubbish, fish and bait.

People living on or visiting the island can help reduce the number of negative interactions with dingoes, by not feeding or encouraging them and by keeping all food and rubbish secured.

## **General**

### **Why do wongari become aggressive?**

Feeding, encouraging and interacting with wongari makes them less fearful of people and dependent on hand-outs. Because access to human food takes less energy and exertion, and they may become aggressive towards people to access food. Their wariness and hunting skills decline, their dependence

on human food increases and in turn their aggressiveness towards people can escalate. The sequence of events from feeding dingoes to serious dingo aggression or an attack doesn't take very long sometimes only a matter of days.

### **Wongari are so cute and playful, why can't I pat them or feed them?**

Dingos are beautiful animals, but they are not domestic dogs. People should never attempt to pat them and they do not respond to commands. Like any apex predator, they can be dangerous and unpredictable, which is why visitors and residents should never feed or disturb them.

Keeping the wongari living wild is the best thing for their conservation and long term survival. Their best protection is for humans not to interfere with their natural behaviour, so they do not become habituated and dangerous.

Feeding wongari makes them less fearful of people and dependent on hand-outs. Their hunting skills can decline and they may become aggressive towards people.

Attempting to take selfies with, or close-up photos of wongari equally contributes to reducing a wongari's natural wariness and places the person at risk.

Unfortunately once a wongari starts to lose its wariness of people, it will ignore threats and comes closer to people. Habituated wongari expect food from everyone and may not be taught or learn to hunt properly becoming more dominant or steal food by aggression. When wongari display aggression they can actively stalk or circle people, lunge at them or nip or bit savagely.

It's important to remember that the wongari are wild animals and should never be confused with domestic pets.

### **Why isn't the department doing more to prevent human/wongari interactions?**

The department is focused heavily and continuing to implement actions to reduce the likelihood of dingoes becoming highly habituated and aggressive to people and therefore avoiding the undesirable action of euthanising dingoes.

- To help improve visitor safety on K'gari, construction began on a new beachfront camping area on Monday. It is expected to be completed by early next year.
- QPWS is in consultation with the BAC to identify other suitable fenced camping sites on the island.
- A new Butchulla community education ranger has also been appointed and they have been actively involved in visitor communication and education, and the fenced camping area project.
- The Government has increased penalties for deliberately feeding or disturbing dingoes to a minimum \$2,135 per offence, and \$10,676 maximum.

The government is also currently reviewing the Fraser Island Dingo Conservation and Risk Management Strategy Implementation Plan, to look at what more might need to be done to further improve communication, education and visitor safety on K'gari (Fraser Island).

In addition to the review, increased penalties for people who intentionally feed or disturb wongari (dingo) are now in place and plans are underway to investigate potential sites for new fenced camping areas.

These actions are all important steps towards mitigating the risks of negative interactions and dingoes becoming familiar and aggressive towards visitors, and the ultimate need to take euthanasia action.

### **What consequences do people face if people don't follow the rules regarding wongari on the island?**

One of the department's key roles is to help educate visitors to K'gari about the important role they play in helping protect this natural environment. Our QPWS rangers work closely with the Butchulla people to make sure that visitors understand their obligations, helping them stay safe and minimising harm for our native animals.

However, when people break the law—endangering themselves, others and the wongari (dingo)—we respond with appropriate enforcement action.

In the 2017–18 financial year, the department issued 166 warnings to visitors about leaving food unattended. And 12 fines were issued during that same period to people who broke the law.

### **The wongari on K'gari look so skinny and hungry, why don't you do more to look after them?**

Wongari are naturally lean and fit. They live a very active life, running or trotting up to 40km a day patrolling their territories and hunting. Thin-looking animals seen from late summer to early autumn may be juveniles (around 6–7 months old), who have lost some weight immediately after leaving their dens or packs.

Wongari eat a diverse range of natural prey from insects to larger mammals. On K'gari this can include bandicoots, echidnas, bushrats, swamp wallabies, grey kangaroo and dead marine life. They also forage on native berries—particularly midyim and blue flax flower—which are abundant at most times throughout the year.

Feeding wongari makes them less fearful of people and dependent on hand-outs. The wongari's hunting skills can decline and they may become aggressive towards people. Which is why people should never feed them or try and attract them using food or food waste.

### **Wongari were here first, we should be restricting visitor numbers, not euthanising animals.**

The government and the Traditional Owners (Butchulla Aboriginal Corporation) are committed to supporting a sustainable and healthy wongari (dingo) population, while minimising the risks to human safety and dingo welfare.

Visitor sites on the island cover a very small area compared to the large, undisturbed habitats that are available for the wongari to thrive. When everyone does the right thing, the island can support both recreation and wildlife and habitat conservation.

### **They are just feral animals, why should we care about them?**

Fraser Island dingoes may be the purest strain of dingo on the eastern Australian seaboard, so their conservation is of national significance. The best thing residents and visitors can do to help conserve the dingoes is to ensure they remain 'living wild'—that means not feeding or interacting with them.

### **I am camping on K'gari over the Christmas break, will I still be safe?**

QPWS Rangers will have focused patrols in high visitation areas over the Christmas school holidays and rangers will be out educating and urging visitors to K'gari to be extremely vigilant and be dingo safe at all times. However, visitor safety is the responsibility of everyone who visits the island. We encourage all visitors to K'gari to be dingo safe:

- Stay within arm's reach of your children
- Walk in groups – never run
- Camp in fenced areas where possible
- Secure all food - never feed dingoes
- Store food away from tents
- Secure all rubbish, fish and bait.

If you are camping with children, we recommend you stay in one of the fenced camping areas for added safety.