Keppel Islands — a history of sorrow and success

Five thousand years of island life
The Ganomi—Woppaburra people lived on North Keppel Island for 5000 years and for at least 700 years on Great Keppel Island. As marine specialists, they traditionally used the rich resources of the intertidal zone, fringing reefs and surrounding seas to support their communal lifestyle. At the same time they maintained their traditional homeland and all its natural resources.

The reliable fresh water supply from Humpy Island Creek and several large middens (containing shells and bones discarded during meals eaten long ago) suggest the Ganomi—Woppaburra people visited here at least seasonally.

Europeans arrive and name the Keppel group
In 1770 Captain James Cook sailed through Keppel Bay in the Endeavour and noted seeing people on one island. He named Keppel Bay after Rear Admiral Keppel.

Island culture and community destroyed
Settlers arrived in 1866 to set up grazing on the Keppel Islands and almost destroyed the Ganomi—Woppaburra lifestyle, culture and community in only 36 years. Some graziers delivered a series of shattering blows to the Ganomi—Woppaburra people. Disease, shootings and virtual slavery quickly took a heavy toll.

The few remaining Ganomi—Woppaburra people were relocated to Yeppoon or other missions for “their own good” — almost all perished.

Grazing fails but still leaves its mark
For almost 100 years, several different families tried and failed to successfully graze on Great Keppel Island, North Keppel Island and also briefly here on Humpy Island. Overstocking with sheep and the release of goats left the larger islands in the Keppels eroded and degraded. The smaller islands fortunately escaped the damage.

The McDougall family tried to graze sheep on Humpy during the First World War but, due to difficulties getting the sheep shorn, they abandoned the enterprise.

Fierce fishing competition
The first interest in the valuable fish and oyster resources in the Keppel Bay area began in 1860, creating conflict between fishermen and island leaseholders. Fishermen’s Reserves were set aside in the 1890s on Great Keppel and North Keppel Islands to help relieve tensions.

In 1897, James Morris and his family were among the first to professionally fish the area with rivals setting up some years later. Oyster gathering was particularly competitive.

Resorts offer holiday havens
Although there are no records of organised tourism on this island, low-key holiday resorts were set up elsewhere in the Keppels.

Dorothy Phillips erected five cabins for holiday-makers on North Keppel Island. An environmental education centre stands there today.

The Morris family established a resort on Great Keppel Island in 1958 — it has expanded rapidly since. Cabin accommodation is still available on Pumpkin Island.

Early concerns for conservation … on land
In 1908 the Emu Park Progress Society objected to the Keppel Islands being leased to private operators and suggested Great Keppel Island should be made a public reserve. Over 30 years later, some Keppel Bay islands were declared national parks.

… and in the water
In 1975 the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park was declared over the waters of the area and in 2004 a new zoning plan provided improved management to balance conservation and use.

Reconnecting with culture
Today, Ganomi—Woppaburra descendants are working to re-establish their cultural ties with their traditional homeland. They are renewing their special and unique identity so that they can fulfil their cultural obligations to ‘care for country’ and pass this cultural inheritance onto their children.

In March 2005, the Ganomi—Woppaburra descendants were granted land on Great Keppel Island — a major step in realising these goals.