

---

# Moral Dilemma Issue

---

## **Bird Kill at North West Island**

by Dr Alice Kaye

Queensland Department of Environment

Dr Kaye presented this paper at Jervis Bay to open discussion on a sensitive issue for many teachers. The dilemma is a multi-faceted one resulting from an incident in 1995 when a number of senior school students were involved in deliberately killing sea birds while participating in a wilderness camp at North West Island on the great Barrier Reef.

### **The camp setting**

The Great Barrier Reef Marine Park of 344 000 sq km is a multi-use park and provides for the protection and wise use of the Great Barrier Reef. It is managed by the Queensland Department of Environment on behalf of the Marine Park Authority.

North West Island is one of the Capricorn Bunker group of coral cays off Gladstone, Queensland. It is one of two with limited facilities, including toilets and primitive camping grounds. It is the largest cay in the group (105 ha) and the most popular camping cay with 1800 campers a year. About 41% of North West Island visitors are on school camps, with 750 students per year. Camping permits are issued by the Rockhampton office of the Queensland Department of Environment.

The Island is covered in *Pisonia* forest, with one of the largest stands of *Pisonia* trees in the world. It is very important for sea birds. 500 000 Shearwaters (mutton birds) nest there annually mainly from October to April. The interior of the island is full of their burrows. There are also 150 000 Black noddies (a smaller tern) nesting annually in trees on the island, from October to April. In the summer trees are thick with birds and nests and there are lots of droppings and a very strong smell of ammonia. These droppings are an important source of nitrogen for plants on the island. Few birds have any fear of humans and can be approached closely when on the nest and near the burrows.

### **Island impacts and issues**

Visitors to coral cays can have a variety of impacts on the natural resources and facilities. These range from serious acts of deliberate vandalism and breaches of regulations to unintentional and accidental impacts arising from a lack of understanding or excess numbers. Official records of school group impacts are scarce and incomplete and it is not possible to quantify them in a scientific manner. However, anecdotal reports from Queensland Department of Environment staff and other sources indicate that the following activities are a definite or likely concern. It should be noted that these issues are not necessarily confined to school groups.

#### **Destruction of wildlife or vegetation (vandalism)**

The only officially confirmed recent incident of wildlife destruction is the killing in 1995 described below of about 150 Noddies on North West Island by 16 secondary school students from a High School in Brisbane on a camping excursion. Unofficial communications indicate that this is not an isolated incident but that it is the most extreme. Other stories of students pulling off birds' wings, breaking off branches for various purposes (e.g. for spears), spearing reef flat animals for fun, carving into tree trunks or throwing turtle hatchlings at each other have also circulated.

---

# Moral Dilemma Issue

---

## **Disturbance to nesting sea birds and turtles**

This may be deliberate or accidental. Ground nesting sea birds are very easily disturbed if humans approach too closely and may abandon nests and chicks. Excess noise, sudden movements, crowds and artificial lights can disrupt turtle nesting causing them to return to the ocean without laying. Lights in particular disorientate hatchlings away from the ocean.

## **Illegal collecting**

Collecting of shells and other materials is not permitted in the national park or the Marine Park adjacent to the islands but does occur presumably through ignorance or lack of thought. Mostly it is either a souveniring or bait gathering activity although there is evidence that it occasionally occurs as part of a set group activity (e.g. pipi gathering for a soup making competition). Coral collecting is not permitted without a permit.

## **Illegal fishing or spearing**

Line and spear fishing is not permitted in the Marine Park next to the island but may occur through ignorance or disregard of the boundaries.

## **Reef walking damage**

Student groups moving through fragile areas of reef flat can cause localised damage by trampling and crushing coral and sponges and collapsing friable (crumbly) substrates. Sometimes boulders are left overturned exposing and killing the animals beneath, and balance poles are used for prodding animals, damaging soft tissues. Some dangerous or large animals (e.g. blue spotted ray, juvenile sea turtle) may be chased or harassed. Handling of excessive numbers of animals during demonstrations (e.g. each student in a group finding and causing a sea cucumber to expel its curvierian tubules in defensive reaction) also occurs.

## **Trampling damage on cay**

This includes the collapsing of mutton bird burrows trapping the birds within during nesting season, and some minor erosion of fringe vegetation along unmarked access pathways.

## **Littering**

Remains of fishing tackle and general litter from food and other packaging are not always removed.

## **Snorkelling and diving impacts**

Groups of student snorkellers and divers can break and damage coral by inexperienced or careless use of fins, using coral colonies as hand holds and while entering and leaving the water along reef crests and pool edges.

## **Fires**

There have been reports of student groups lighting camp fires.

---

# Moral Dilemma Issue

---

## **Conflicts with other users**

Large school groups can be noisy and intrusive for other visitors both in the camping area and at prime recreational locations around the island and reef.

## **Case study**

### **The issue**

North West Island – a case of deliberate vandalism in the wilful destruction of wildlife.

### **The site**

The events took place on an isolated island, in relation to a camp of 50 students, aged 16-18 years (final school year).

- the aim of the camp was social development
- the students were aware of National Park guidelines
- they were deliberately left to structure their own time for some periods
- there were lots of sea birds, lots of smelly droppings
- the birds were easy to catch.

Sixteen students became caught up in a bird killing competition for several days, following the lead of a few who apparently became furious about the noise and smell, and made clubs and spears to hit and kill birds. Though other students were aware of their actions, no one informed the teachers who were camped at the other end of the island away from the students. At some stage, teachers became aware of the dead birds and some bird carcasses were buried.

On the school's return to Brisbane, a newspaper published the story and public outrage resulted. A great deal of pressure was subsequently placed on the Queensland Department of Environment to implement some new management guidelines for educational use of islands to prevent repeat performances.

### **Final outcomes**

Some of the leading students were required to do community service. All were suspended and eventually expelled while the investigations proceeded. Some were reinstated eventually, others transferred to other (independent) schools. No action was taken against the teachers.

---

# Moral Dilemma Issue

---

## Types of vandalism

The motivations and causes of the incident are mixed. Criminologists who work with vandalism usually distinguish different types of activity related to the objectives of the offenders, for example:

acquisitive	acquire money or property
tactical	achieve another end
ideological	further a cause or communicate a message
vindictive play	revenge competition
malicious	expression of rage and frustration
innocuous	done to something seen as valueless

Evidence suggests that depending on who was doing it the North West Island incident was a combination of vindictive play, malicious and innocuous vandalism.

Unofficial communications indicate that this is not an isolated incident but that it is the most extreme. Reports of children with private groups or some adult visitors harassing wildlife have also been made.

## Feedback from group of teachers and environmental educators at the Jervis Bay Workshop

Discussion centred around the following points:

- Is this type of behaviour occurring elsewhere.
- Is it frequent enough to be a more general concern for marine educators.
- Or, is it a rare/freak occurrence peculiar to coral reef locations.

Response by the teachers present:

- Other incidents affecting wildlife were known, especially to penguins in southern areas and to Mutton birds on Southern Australian beaches. So, the incidence of vandalism to wildlife areas is not restricted to coral cays.
- No matter if the key objectives of a field camp are to develop an independent camp style, increased adult supervision, at least daily contact, is required. Students must be made aware of the importance of the relationships of wildlife to the area.
- Teachers agreed that there was less trouble in forested areas than on islands or coasts and questioned the need to hold wilderness camps on coral cays.

# Moral Dilemma Issue

## Prevention strategies

These can be divided into two main groups which represent two different types of approach

Situational approach	Motivational approach
changes setting to limit opportunities	changes values and behaviours
implemented in short to medium term	implemented in medium to long term
education programs to address impacts, supervision ratios provide more robust venues with seasonal closures different types of programs better informed leaders	education programs to enhance appreciation of environment, improve understanding of impacts, and teach appropriate behaviour values and social development

## How is this applied to Reef islands?

At present all school groups visiting the cays require:

- a National Park camping permit
- a Marine Park educational permit, if educational studies within the marine park are to be undertaken
- an education purposes permit, if the group is going to do manipulative studies (i.e. activities involving collecting or impacts as opposed to simple observations) on the island national park
- a group activities permit, where the studies on the island are non-manipulative and only involve observations.

Following the North West Island incident in 1995, educational and group activities permit applications have been assessed more or less according to the following general interim guidelines:

1. A detailed program of activities must accompany all permit applications before they can be assessed.
2. The permit application is then assessed by the permits officer at the Rockhampton office using the following criteria:
  - a. Is a coral cay site essential for the educational objectives of the visit to be fulfilled? If not the group should be asked to use an alternative venue such as North Keppel Island.
  - b. Can the activities be conducted elsewhere? For example at Heron Island Research Station or North Keppel Island Education Centre. If so, the group should be directed to these venues.
  - c. What is the level of supervision? a student: to adult (teacher, parent or other responsible adult) ratio of eight to one should be considered an acceptable minimum.

This arrangement is being reviewed currently as part of a more general review of the educational use of the Capricorn Cays National Park camping islands. There is likely to be some extensive consultation with the Queensland Department of Education and key educational users. As a result of this review, a new set of permit guidelines is being developed.

---

# Moral Dilemma Issue

---

## Discussion with the Workshop on motivational approach

This is a more complex area and a shared responsibility. The Queensland Department of Environment's role lies primarily with providing good information about habitats, wildlife and possible impacts, clear guidelines about appropriate behaviour on the parks and assisting or advising on the training of teachers about the use of these sites.

However, in the long term development of young peoples' environmental awareness, appreciation and responsibility, teachers play a lead and critical role.

In relation to this particular type of issue – wildlife vandalism – what are the key educational issues?

To pinpoint some of the educational issues and place the incident in a social setting, here are a few questions students may ask of their teachers:

- How is this behaviour different from a fishing competition?
- How is it different from a feral animal hunt (particularly, the feral cat and hen hunts involving other students conducted in the past on North West Island)?
- Would you have worried if we had done exactly the same thing with cane toads in a local suburban park (it's not fair, you adults are full of bullshit)?

## Notes to use for answering the above questions

### 1. Fishing competition

- not conducted on a national park
- not killing a protected species
- fish are used for food
- permits are arranged and adhered to.

### 2. Feral animal hunts

- animals are introduced and threaten native species
- controls to ensure animals are killed humanely.

### 3. Clearing

- at this point in time it is legitimate to destroy habitat or animals for economic development. If you feel this is wrong it is legitimate to protest but be prepared to take the consequences.

Directly after one of the news reports on ABC TV about the incident, a feature on mangrove clearing in Gladstone Harbour was reported. The latter, a far more destructive environmental impact several thousand times over, was reported positively. Why?

## Summary

One of the main points here is that it is not acceptable to kill or destroy animals or plants just for fun or because they represent a temporary inconvenience. Why? From a purely practical point of view if we did we would quickly destroy the world around us as there are so many of us.

If each of the 1800 plus campers a year killed off 10 birds each at North West Island 180 000 birds would be killed after 10 years – more than the annual nesting population.

From a management perspective, collective impact is one of the most central and important processes for students (and adults) to understand and appreciate in relation to their individual behaviour with regard to the environment. What seems trivial on an individual level is not on a collective level.

# Moral Dilemma Issue

This practical consideration underpins most management guidelines for human activity on parks – minimising small individual impacts means minimising the large collective impacts. Hence the rules and regulations about not collecting plants and animals on national parks.

*Lord of the Flies* is a novel by William Golding published in 1954 which has parallels to the North West incident that are both disturbing and food for thought.

One of the main themes of *Lord of the Flies* is that there is a primitive destructive force inherent in all humans and unless it is recognised for what it is and controlled it can lead to great evil. Golding's boys were from a civilised society, but don't seem to have learnt from it. The child's dream of freedom from the restrictions of adult society becomes a nightmare.

The double perspective at the end of the book where the readers can see the boys as savage men but the naval lieutenant who rescues them can only see a semicircle of little boys, their bodies streaked with coloured clay, sharp sticks in their hands, suggests an adult's failure to understand what children can be like. The officer's language, 'Fun and games ... having a war or something? ... I should have thought that a pack of British boys would have been able to put up a better show than this', suggests a double inadequacy. The man doesn't really appreciate either what adults are like or the violence inherent in his own adult civilised world.

<i>Lord of the Flies</i>	North West Island
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>deserted coral island</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>remote undeveloped coral cay</li></ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>group of young boys under 12 without adults</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>group of students 16-18 with unsupervised time</li></ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>gradual retreat into primitive ritual and savagery</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>development of a killing spree and inventive methods for killing birds</li></ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>characters have no relevant skills generally naive and incompetent</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>students not cooking for themselves not empowered, first trip to cay</li></ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>increasing competition and confrontation resulting in the death of two boys</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>increasing conflict between the doers and some of those not involved</li></ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>children seek an external manifestation of evil, 'the beast' to rationalise their hunts</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>students reason that their behaviour was a response to the birds poohing on them, and using them as a toilet</li></ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>island set alight to drive out beast</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>branches used as clubs</li></ul>

---

# Moral Dilemma Issue

---

## Conclusion

The following messages can be learnt from this incident and the discussion:

1. A simple practical one: we must all recognise that students are not necessarily little angels that will behave decently in a wilderness setting. Some may behave very badly for all sorts of reasons. We have a responsibility as educators to protect those settings. Therefore we must organise our outings in such a way that opportunities for that type of misbehaviour are minimised.
2. Adult ethical and moral integrity: while we may all deplore the misconduct at North West we must acknowledge that our adult civilised culture still condones a range of far greater environmental destruction which needs to be recognised and challenged. As environmental educators we have a responsibility to encourage students to think about and question environmental policy and issues critically as well as help them develop their environmental appreciation and knowledge.

## Postscript

- The Queensland Department of Environment subsequently has implemented much stricter guidelines for school camps on the coral islands.
- Amongst educators, there continues to be discussion of these issues and student vandalism on camps.
- Adults convicted of cruelty or destruction of protected wildlife such as sea birds on islands of the Reef are being fined heavily.