

Stewards of Cultural and Ecological Riches: Great Sandy

Global region

Australasia

Domestic region

Queensland, Australia

Internationally Designated Areas

K'gari World Heritage Site

1992

Great Sandy Strait Ramsar Wetland

1999

Great Sandy Biosphere Reserve

2009

The Great Sandy region is a treasure of sand and sea that is globally recognised through UNESCO World Heritage, UNESCO Biosphere Reserve, and Ramsar Wetland designations.

Rich culture, diverse nature

Declared a biosphere reserve in 2009 for its “cultural ecological significance,” the Great Sandy Biosphere Reserve spans vast sand-based forests including mangroves, eucalypts, riparian rainforest, and dry rainforest across 96 regional ecosystems.

More than 2,000 plant species thrive here, from rare southern penda to the elusive ball nut, while native fauna such as gummy sharks and white-bellied cuckoo-shrikes make their home in this extraordinary mosaic of habitats.

At the heart of the reserve lies K'gari, the world's largest sand island and a World Heritage Site, offering visitors an unparalleled encounter with nature. Half of the world's perched lakes are found here, and it is the only place on earth where tall rainforests rise above 200 m on shifting sand dunes.

Partnerships protecting nature

The Aboriginal Butchulla people, traditional custodians of the land, lead conservation efforts across K'gari, the Great Sandy Strait, and nearby mainland areas. Visitors can trek the K'gari Great Walk, swim in the famed ‘champagne’ pools, marvel at Lake McKenzie, go whale spotting, explore shipwrecks, and perhaps glimpse a dingo in the wild.

Separating K'gari from the mainland, the Great Sandy Strait is a double-ended sand passage estuary fed by the Susan and Mary Rivers, coastal streams, and the Cooloola Sand Mass. Its lower reaches were designated a Ramsar Wetland of International Significance in 1999 due to its marine biodiversity, including more than 1% of the world's red-capped plovers, great knots, and curlews, alongside species like the mangrove honeyeater.

Honouring the custodians of the land

The Butchulla people are the traditional custodians of the land, and they lead many collaborative projects within the Great Sandy Biosphere Reserve such as habitat restoration projects and capacity-building programmes for locals.

In 2021, the renaming of the UNESCO World Heritage Site from Fraser Island to K'gari reflected this recognition of traditional custodianship, ensuring that culture, ecology, and sustainable tourism remain intertwined.

K'gari and the Great Sandy region are sites of thriving cultural and natural heritage. From ancient sand dunes to perched lakes, this MIDA demonstrates how sustainable leisure activities, conservation, and traditional knowledge can flourish together through honouring both nature and culture.