

Chapter 3

The Gold Coast before Cook named Mount Warning

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We could and should ask, where does the Gold Coast sit on a scale from 'good' to 'bad' in environmental terms? Sustainable or unsustainable? Is it progressing or regressing? It is far too early in the book to attempt to answer this. Maybe at the end of the book you will feel confident to make your own assessment. What we do in this chapter is to make obvious a small number of seemingly irreversible changes that have occurred since the first escaped convicts walked the Gold Coast beaches.

We know that indigenous Australians have lived on the Gold Coast for a very long time, possibly over 20 000 years. We take as given that James Cook was the first European to sail close to its beaches. He named various obvious landmarks. It was some years later that European explorers, such as John Oxley, and escaped convicts put their feet on the Gold Coast beaches.

From that time to the present, the dramatic increase in both residential population and tourist numbers has led to very significant changes in the physical environment of the Gold Coast. Most noticeable has been the construction of canal estates and the building of high-rise apartments on the foreshore. The success of tourism has radically transformed the beachfront environment at Surfers Paradise and, to a lesser extent, that at some other places with New York-style high-rise buildings. The tourism and residential construction on the foredunes, most mined in the 1940s and 1950s for rutile, zircon and other black sands, has led to a battle with nature and the need to harden the beachfront with rock walls and groynes. In the hinterland, rainforests were destroyed to permit dairy-farming and horticulture; today the demise of farming has resulted in farms becoming rural-residential blocks.

Go back before European settlement and we would discover a different Gold Coast. European intrusion saw the demise of red cedar in the rainforests and the gradual carving-out of farms in the forests and floodplains. On the latter, lining the river banks, were extensive mangrove forests. Most are now gone. If you wish to imagine the coastal sand dunes and the beaches as they would have been before they were mined then built on, visit the natural, ever-changing beaches on World Heritage-listed Fraser Island. 'Ever-changing' is the key to beaches and dunes moulded by longshore drift, currents, waves, wind and the work of the moon and tides. The occasional severe storm or more ferocious cyclone will be even more determined in sculpting the beach. If we wanted to, we could live with these natural occurrences at the Gold Coast, we do on Fraser Island and parts of the Sunshine Coast. That would require a vastly different attitude from the one we brought to the Gold. We decided we knew better than nature, and now pay the cost.