

## **Notes from Research:**

### **Battle to save Marcus Beach High Dunes**

### **Sunshine Coast Wildflower Festival 26 Aug 2025**

### **Shaun Walsh**

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#### **Introduction**

Welcome to Sunshine Coast Wildflower Festival. This is a talk and walk on the Battle to Save the Marcus Beach High Dunes. My name is Shaun Walsh and I also have a few volunteers from Urban Wildlife Gardens in Noosa to help this morning

First up I wish to respectfully acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of the lands and waters of the Noosa area, the Kabi Kabi people, and pay respect to their Elders, past, present and emerging.

In terms of housekeeping hopefully we are appropriately dressed and have good footwear, hats and water bottles. We are walking up sand tracks to 60 metres elevation and will be taking it gently to enjoy the vegetation and view.

Please keep together and I have??? as the sweep to keep us together. I have a first aid kit and extra water and don't hesitate to reach out if you need assistance

In terms of myself I am a local environmental planner and landscape architect. I was young town planner at Noosa Council in the early 1990s and an observer of the battle that I am going to talk about today that stretched from the period 1990 to 2001.

I am here to simply tell that story and have researched the transcripts of the former town planner at Noosa Council Raul Weyhardt, Council documents including the Marcus Beach Development Control Plan and minutes of the Noosa Parks Association from that era, as well as to provide balanced perspective, the writings of former Deputy Mayor and TM Burke Land Development Manager Peter Sharp.

I wish to acknowledge the Heritage Noosa collection in the Noosa Library where I have gained all this information – it is a remarkable collection of local story telling.

Please note that I am not a botanist. Some of you will know more about the plant species than I will and welcome you to speak up and share your knowledge.

I will start the talk here, and then be stopping once on the way up, before telling the main story of the Battle to Save Marcus Beach on the summit of the dune.

## **Talk Part 1 – History of TM Burke**

The history of T.M. Burke Pty Ltd is a rich and influential chapter in Australian property development, spanning over a century and evolving into what is now known as Frasers Property Australia. Founded by Thomas Michael Burke in 1924, T.M. Burke Pty Ltd quickly became one of Australia's first national property development companies. Burke, born in 1870 near Ararat, Victoria, started his career as a railway clerk and later founded the Civil Services Co-Operative Society in 1903.

He was a visionary in real estate, buying land during economic downturns and selling it affordably to returning servicemen after WWI, promoting home ownership.

### **Notable Developments**

Merrivale Garden Suburb in Melbourne (now Reservoir) was one of the first to emphasize green space and walkability.

Sunshine Beach and Peregrin on the Sunshine Coast were developed between the 1920s and 1960s, with T.M. Burke playing a key role in infrastructure like roads and bridges.

The company also contributed to developments in Noosa starting in 1927.

### **Transition and Expansion**

After Thomas Burke's death in 1949, his son Marcus Burke took over and eventually sold the business to L.J. Hooker Corporation in the 1960s.

Hooker Corporation expanded the business significantly, developing suburbs like Killarney Heights, Cherrybrook, and the Centenary Suburbs in Brisbane, as well as retail hubs like Warringah Mall and Pacific Fair

### **Australand Era**

Following financial restructuring in the late 1980s, the company was rebranded as Australian Housing and Land, later becoming Australand.

Australand became a major player in mixed-use and sustainable developments, including Freshwater Place in Melbourne and The Ponds in Sydney. This is the era of ownership of the Battle to Save Marcus Beach high dunes

### **Frasers Property Australia**

In 2014, Australand was acquired by Frasers Centrepoint, a Singaporean multinational, and rebranded as Frasers Property Australia.

Today, the company is known for award-winning projects like Central Park Sydney, Hamilton Reach in Brisbane, and Burwood Brickworks, the world's most sustainable shopping centre

### **Sunshine Beach & Noosa Beach Estate**

In 1929, T.M. Burke initially launched the Noosa Beach Estate after acquiring 75 hectares of beachfront land from Noosa Council in exchange for building two bridges (Lake Doonella and Weyba Creek) and a connecting road.

This estate was one of the first statutorily planned towns in Australia, designed by surveyor R.A. McInnis, and praised for its visionary zoning and layout.

Originally marketed as Golden Beach, the name was changed to Sunshine Beach in 1949 after a naming conflict with Caloundra.

### **Infrastructure Development**

T.M. Burke was instrumental in building the David Low Way, a coastal highway linking Sunshine Beach to Peregian and beyond. This was part of a deal with the Queensland Government that granted the company development rights in exchange for constructing the road.

This infrastructure opened up the region to tourism and residential growth, laying the foundation for modern Sunshine Coast communities.

### **Peregian & Sunrise Beach**

Following the success at Sunshine Beach, T.M. Burke expanded into Peregian Beach, Sunrise Beach, and Marcus Beach, releasing land as economic conditions allowed.

These developments were carefully planned and included amenities like schools, churches, and recreational facilities.

### **Environmental Legacy**

Some of the land originally earmarked for development by T.M. Burke, such as Paradise Cove and The Devil's Kitchen near Alexandria Bay, was later incorporated into the Noosa National Park thanks to lobbying by the Noosa Parks Association.

This helped preserve the natural beauty of the region and limited overdevelopment along the coast.

### **Planning Innovation**

The Noosa Beach Estate plan included zoning by lot number, a precursor to modern planning schemes. It featured:

- Residential, business, and special industry zones.
- "Table of Uses" that classified building types and activities.
- Emphasis on parks, crescents, and accessibility

It could be argued the TM Burke were actually a very responsible developer for their time of the mid 20<sup>th</sup> Century noting their relinquishment of land in Alexandria Bay as well as revolutionary town planning practice. Whilst their name is sullied with the Marcus Beach development, is it really the subsequent owners (Australand) that

were the developer and proponent of residential development on the Marcus Beach high dunes.

Marcus Shores proposal was the last of the sites of the original Sunshine Coast TM Burke development leases from the 1920s and the topic of the talk today

## Talk Part 2 – the High Dunes Ecosystem

We have just crossed into the Mapped Regional Ecosystem 12.2.13. which has an Endangered status. Pre-clearing 400 ha was estimated to be in existence and as a remnant in 2021 is half that of 200 ha which is a relatively small area.

Short description Open or dry heath on dunes and beaches

Structure code Open Heath

Description Open or dry heath. Characteristic shrubs include stunted *Banksia aemula* and *Allocasuarina littoralis* as well as *Xanthorrhoea johnsonii*, *Leptospermum semibaccatum*, *Phebalium woombye*, *Dillwynia retorta* and *Caustis recurvata*. Usually occurs on Pleistocene dunes and beach ridges. Not a Wetland. (BVG1M: 29a).

Supplementary description Bean et al. (1998), D12

Protected areas Naree Budjong Djara NP (Minjerrabah) Noosa NP, Great Sandy NP, Littabella NP (South of Agnes Waters)

Special values 12.2.13: Habitat for threatened plant species including *Allocasuarina emuina*, *Acacia attenuata*, *A. baueri* subsp. *baueri*, *Prasophyllum wallum* and near threatened species including *Macarthuria complanata*.

Fire management guidelines SEASON: Late summer to winter. INTENSITY: Moderate. INTERVAL: 8-15 years. INTERVAL\_MIN: 8. INTERVAL\_MAX: 15. STRATEGY: Aim for a burn mosaic of 40-60%. Do not re-light areas remaining unburnt after a planned burn. Burn in association with surrounding ecosystems. ISSUES: Often contains obligate seed regenerating species and as such, the application of frequent fire may reduce species richness if the intervals between fire are not sufficient for plants to produce seed. *Acacia attenuata* requires fire for seed germination, produces seed from 2-3 years of age and may senesce from 5-10 years. Too frequent a fire frequency may result in loss of terrestrial, threatened ground orchids and net loss of nutrients over time from an already nutrient poor system.

It is also noted in Council documents from the 1990s that the Marcus Beach site provides the last substantial link between the reserved foredune systems east of the David Low Way and conserved natural areas west of the David Low Way.

Maintenance of these linkages is important to sustaining the flora and fauna of these areas, which are too small to sustain all species unless connected in a network.

The Marcus Beach site supports a native biological community of high integrity, with a high diversity of fauna and flora for its size (approximately 60ha). The site is known to support at least 98 species of plants, 52 birds, 12 reptiles and between 7 and 9 mammals. The site combined with the surrounding area (which will be influenced by

any development of the Marcus Beach site) supports a total of at least 76 birds, 15 reptiles, 12 mammals, 5 fish and 10 frogs.

5. For its relatively small area of about 60 ha, the Marcus Beach site supports an unusually high number of plant and animal species of conservation significance. One rare plant, *Macarthuria complanata*, two vulnerable plants, *Acacia baueri* and *Gompholobium virgaum* var. *emarginarum*, and a rare bird species, *Calyptorhynchus lathamii* (Glossy Black Cockatoo) have been recorded using the site.

You can see the size of this development site 60Ha was fundamental to the retention of this regional ecosystem which only has 200Ha remaining.

### **Talk Part 3: The Battle to Save Marcus Beach High Dunes**

Firstly I am going to share with you a plan of the proposed development by Australand on this site showing 100's of allotments, retail and resort facilities (attached)

From the transcripts of the former Noosa Shire Council Town Planner Raul Weychardt - I can't say it any better than this

#### **Raul Weychardt – Oral History 2017 Heritage Noosa**

*I will shift over to the beach front. This is a project that I'm rather pleased about. It was to do with TM Bourke and their development lease and a large 58 hectare parcel they had right on the beach at Marcus Beach. Incidentally Marcus Beach is named after the M out of TM Bourke. Marcus Bourke was the original founder of the TM Bourke Company and grandfather of the people that we were dealing with at the time so Marcus Beach is named after him. Little point in history.*

*So we had these development leases that went from Sunshine Beach all the way down to Peregian Beach and development was evolving at both ends and starting to happen in the middle as well. The leases were managed by the State Government and council's involvement was we had a planning scheme that applied to it and we would deal with the sub development applications but the intent of it was largely driven by the fact that the government owned the land and issued these leases. The boundaries were a bit rubbery and we recognised that not always did they stick to their boundaries. The Government got 20 percent of the sale price of the land. They left this very high section of land, this high dune heath. Quite unusual vegetation up there and when you walk up there, it's just got magnificent views over the ocean and back over Lake Weyba and you think wow isn't this spectacular. It would make an impressive home site. It was shown as residential or future urban now in our 1988 strategic plan. They had an entitlement to make application for development and it was at a time too when the environment was starting to emerge as being a more relevant issue for development and also be recognised by the courts.*

*In the early 80s that was rare. It was a new thing emerging that the environment was something you take into account when considering development appeals. They lodged development applications over the site and they were for a large hotels, cascading down the hill and residential development over all of it. We'd had some early environmental studies which highlighted that this was pretty impressive vegetation. It's quite a steep slope. It wouldn't all be suitable for the sort of housing they had in mind. In our inequitable style, we refused the application. That led to a court case again or at least an appeal was lodged by TM Bourke. We did a bit of preliminary negotiations on it. Didn't get very far.*

*The State Government actually stepped in being the land holder and said we've got a situation here. We're the land holder. Here's the council planning authority. Here's the lessee who's a client of ours. Can we sort this out by an alternative process? So we settled on doing a separate planning review of the site. I had to lead the process and I had one of the department planners worked with me and I did a kind of biophysical study of the site and a portion about 45 percent of it to development around half. Submitted that back to the groups. Well TM Bourke (weren't) having a bar of that. They thought it was a bit laughable to only get half of this beautiful big property under development. A bit of a stalemate there and I remember walking into the Mayor's office. I said to Noel (Playford) . You know we are the planning authority here. We've done a plan and it was only done as an exercise but we are entitled to develop control plans which are particular plans for particular localities that set out the future and they become government policy. If we went down that path, we could be more insistent about the outcome here and because it is crown land, the government may either gazette it or not or force the issue about the lease.*

*The government will always have the right to ask TM Burke to forfeit the lease without compensation which we really had hoped they would do but in the end they chose not to. In fact, they took that clause out the lease which was a bit bewildering and disappointing. I did a development control plan but before I did I secured the services of a well-regarded conservationist and environmental expert who did a very detailed study of the site and reported back to say that this is outstanding vegetation. It is quite distinctive. It's different to the vegetation around it. It has high value. He showed a small area along the David Low Way frontage of the site which he thought could be suitable for development. I looked up and I said "No, it's all going to open space." So I did a development control plan that showed the site green all over it. 58 hectares.*

*Put it to the council. The council said tick we agree with that. The community really backed that concept. There was a street march along David Low Way with about 1500 people which I didn't participate in which I probably shouldn't being the planning officer involved with the council. Then we sent off to the government and we wondered what would happen... (1993)*

## **From the writings of Peter Sharp former development manager TM Burke from Up Rose the Emu 205**

*There was no reason at all why the land should not be developed providing much needed allotments on which others could build their homes. The Special Lease that was granted to the Company in 1959 was done so before most of the protagonists against the Company were born or had even heard of Marcus Beach. The Conditions of Development still apply whether the conservationists like it or not and even though I am not in a position now to make comments on the moves, I still believe in the inherent rights of an individual or a company to sensibly develop land subject to those conditions. Most of the conservationists live in either Noosa Heads or the three coastal townships influenced by the quality the Company instilled in the development and its planning and execution.*

*However they believe they have the right to stop others from enjoying the same benefits and lifestyle. I call it the "Last House in the Street" syndrome. Or alternatively, I'm all right Jack now you shove off. It's a personal, greedy, selfish attitude towards life, people and humanity in general, although we see it not only at Marcus Beach and Noosa but elsewhere. This feeling continues. The world is too small a place for such greed and typifies the 'me' attitude that seems to be the norm today and not the 'we' attitude that existed in the early years. The time for those who oppose development to arrive on the scene was in the very early years of development. In which case, development would not have proceeded at all. The irony is that at that time there was nothing there to attract them to the lifestyle that is there today.*

## **From the Minutes of the Noosa Parks Association**

Detailed minutes from the late 1980 to the mid 1990s showed a very active involvement and advocacy on the development proposal. I can't overstate how much they were involved in advocacy work to protect the dunes in concert with Council.

*The public consultation process resulted in a petition with 1084 signatures and 72 individual submissions supporting the no-development DCP, and 1 submission opposing it. There was also a highly successful public rally of about 2,500 people organised by our Association and other environment groups.*

## **Further from the transcript of Raul Weyhardt**

*....So obviously the government had some discussion with TM Burke. They went down a path I hadn't quite expected. We were told one morning that a helicopter's flying the premier, Wayne Goss, to come to the site at Marcus Beach and he's going to walk to the top and announce the government's decision on my development control plan. He did and he approved it. It was quite a satisfying moment. I walked up the hill to watch that actually unfold and a hugely satisfying moment.*

*However, that wasn't the end of the story unfortunately. The plan that was hatched no doubt between TM Burke with a bit of guidance from the government was to abandon the development plans which was a great result but they lodged a compensation claim with the council for \$11,000,000 I think as what they would have lost out of it if they had developed the land. Certainly a planning document like that would on one hand indicate it was an urban development and the other indicated no development was compensatable. So we had a court case about the amount of compensation and we went all the way through three weeks of hearing and on the second last day we negotiated settlement with TM Burke. We paid them \$2,500,000 and we had \$1.6 million in court costs so for just over \$4 million we managed to secure the 58 hectares of what is now national park. When you visit that area, it is just magnificent. So Noosa National Park now extends well all down through that area. That site's part of Noosa National Park now and it actually goes south of our borders down around to Coolum. It's about 4,000 hectares now of national park so it's a major major expansion and some great achievements following on from the vision of early people. It was terrific to be a part of.*

Raul makes it sound quite straight forward but the Noosa Council meetings show the court case over the development proposal and compensation claim stretched over the best part of that decade until the late 1990s.

Council Minutes from 1997 by Mayor Playford pay public paid tribute to the specific work carried out by Peregrine Beach resident Cr. Heather Melrose in the investigation of the history of the Special Lease to T.M. Burke Estate Pty. Ltd. which has enabled the Council's Solicitors to take the proposed action. I understand that Cr Melrose who was a gifted musician undertook forensic analysis of the state titles and records to dispute the validity of the development lease and put the development claim in serious disrepute as a result of overdevelopment of previous leases.

A Noosa Today article in memoriam for Cr Melrose is quoted as saying that when finally in 2001 when then Environment Minister Dean Wells announced the inclusion of an extra 600 hectares of land including the contested areas into Noosa National Park land, Heather described it as the culmination of a dream. "I didn't get into council for anything else," she said at the time. Vale Cr Melrose and other conservation visionaries from Noosa Council and Noosa Parks Association and the community who helped save the Marcus High Dunes. Important things are worth fighting for!