

Call to go harder on miner



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- Simon Baltais,
Wildlife Preservation
Society of Queensland

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- Environment Minister
Kate Jones

RAVAGED: Large parts of North Stradbroke Island resemble a barren moonscape as a result of massive sand mining operations.

Picture: Adam Head

Greg Stolz

GUARDIANS of North Stradbroke Island have called for American resources giant Unimin to be charged with large-scale theft after the huge extent of allegedly illegal sand-mining was revealed.

The State Government recently charged Unimin with illegal sand-mining on the island after a 12-month investigation during which the company's offices were raided and computer records seized.

Now, the Friends of Stradbroke Island are stepping up pressure to end decades of sand-mining on the eco-sensitive island and have it declared a national park.

It says Unimin should be hit with more serious charges after revelations tens of millions of dollars worth of sand may have been removed from Stradbroke illegally and sold off.

FOSI president Sue Ellen Carew said that, until now, the extent of the sand-mining was not publicly known. But the Depart-

ment of Environment and Resource Management had revealed that 50,000 to 100,000 tonnes a year had been allegedly removed.

"That means that up to 1.8 million tonnes of sand over that period may have been unlawfully removed from the island," Mrs Carew said. "At a street value of \$50 per tonne, a conservative average retail price, this means the extent of the alleged illegality is simply staggering - in the vicinity of \$80 million."

"Imagine if you or I took an excavator and tip truck to the nearest beach, loaded it up with sand and then sold it at the local landscaping centre on a Saturday morning. The authorities would shut us down in an instant."

Wildlife Preservation Society of Queensland spokesman Simon Baltais said the Bligh Government should take stronger action "to show that illegal removal and sale of sand that should be used for rehabilitation will not be tolerated".

"To do this, the company should be charged with

indictable offences - such as stealing and serious environmental harm - to reflect the severity of the alleged illegality," he said.

"That would allow the Government to recoup the millions of dollars in profits that the company made... if it is convicted. The existing charges, being non-indictable, do not permit the state to use its confiscation of illegal proceeds legislation."

Environment Minister Kate Jones said Unimin had been hit with charges deemed by department lawyers as having the best chances of a successful prosecution.

She said the charges, which carry penalties of almost \$800,000, were "top-tier" offences. She said further charges were possible, depending on evidence presented in the court case, due to be heard in Cleveland Magistrates Court next month.

Ms Jones said that if it was proven Unimin had acted illegally, the Government could pursue it for compensation.