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Fraser Island (K’gari) World Heritage Combined Committees Communiqué August 2019



The combined Committees of the Fraser Island (K’gari) World Heritage Community Advisory Committee (CAC) and Scientific Advisory Committee (SAC) met on Butchulla Country in Hervey Bay on Friday 30 August. The meeting was preceded by a Strategic Planning Workshop on Thursday 29 August and followed by the K’gari Conference: Community, Culture and Collaboration – co-hosted by Fraser Island Defenders Organisation, Butchulla Aboriginal Corporation and the University of the Sunshine Coast on Saturday 31 August.

The Committees discussed a number of topics relevant to K’gari and its status as a World Heritage property, raising several concerns for the consideration of the property’s managers to meet the Operational Guidelines under the World Heritage Convention.

Strategic Management Plan for Fraser Island (K’gari)

The Committees expressed their excitement at the commencement of a process for the development of a Strategic Plan for the Fraser Island (K’gari) World Heritage property.

Although the site was gazetted in 1992, the site has never had a Strategic Plan for the entire property which has led to some challenges from a management perspective. Once finalised, the plan will inform other management plans and reviews including the Great Sandy Management Plan and local government planning.

The Committees recommended that the Strategic Plan **must reflect the cultural landscape of K’gari.**

Climate Change Vulnerability Assessment

The Committees were briefed on the findings from a recent survey of Australian World Heritage properties to gauge the extent of concern about and/or impacts on World Heritage values from climate change.

Eighteen submissions were received (for 15 of Australia’s 20 properties) with Key survey findings including:



- Climate change is now a regular topic of discussion by Committees across the majority of WHAs.
- The most significant issues of concern discussed are ‘extreme events’, followed by ‘fire frequency/intensity’, ‘changing rainfall pattern’, ‘sea level rise’, ‘species loss’, and ‘loss of OUV’.
- More than 50% of respondents indicated ‘impacts on tourism’ as a significant issue being discussed.
- A wide range of impacts are reportedly now evident in Australia’s WHAs, with some emerging and even alarming indications of climate related changes.

The Committees discussed their concerns for K’gari including the impacts of climate change on drought and wildfire, biosecurity and implications for the Island’s rainforests, melaleuca swampland and patterned fens.

The Committees also discussed the Climate Change Vulnerability Index (CVI) process (being led by Scott Heron and Jon Day) and the need to undertake an assessment of vulnerability to identify knowledge gaps and inform climate adaptation planning to increase the property’s resilience to future climate change.

The Committees endorsed the CVI process and recommended that the Queensland Government develop a research proposal under the current Australian Heritage Grant funding round.

Monitoring Outstanding Universal Value

Work undertaken by the Scientific Advisory Committee to inform the IUCN Outlook Report and the Strategic Planning process has highlighted the need to monitor Outstanding Universal Value (OUV) to provide a transparent and robust evaluation of the state of the property. The previous Outlook Report did not provide a comprehensive assessment of the OUV which must be addressed for future reports.

The Committees acknowledged the Queensland Parks and Wildlife Service ‘Health Checks’ and Citizen Science programs on K’gari, but recommended the need to monitor OUV in a systematic and ongoing way.

Funding Models and Security

Funding continues to be an issue for the property’s managers and the function of the Advisory Committees. This has necessitated the Governance Review which has raised the concern of a one-size-fits-all approach to Queensland World Heritage properties and their governance in terms of committee size and breadth.

A property the size and complexity of K’gari should attract funding commensurate with its status and operational needs. Instead K’gari currently attracts the same Australian Government funding as the Riversleigh Fossil Mammal Site (\$145K annually) and considerably less than the Wet Tropics Management Area, which in 2017-18 received \$5.8M from the

Australian Government (and \$2.3M from the Queensland Government). Such low-level funding for K'gari fails to acknowledge the economic value of the property, the complex and varied scientific challenges and broad societal engagement with this property. The planned reduction in the committees' size and breadth will have a significant adverse effect on advisory capacity and a downstream impact on the OUV of the property. As a consequence, **the committees recommend a reconsideration to the governance model currently being proposed.**

In March 2017, the Committees endorsed the implementation of a 'user-pays' levy on visitors to K'gari to increase funding for the World Heritage property and to enable the Butchulla Aboriginal Corporation RNTBC (BAC) to co-manage the Outstanding Universal Value of Fraser Island (K'gari) with the Queensland Government. To date this has not been implemented.

The Committees recommend that the current permit reporting review (that will see permit reporting move to an online system to enable the Queensland Government to provide accurate visitation figures for the World Heritage property) must also include a review of fees/online permits to meet management expectations for the site.

Whilst visitor experience is an important aspect of World Heritage management, the Committees suggested that Rangers must be able to manage the property and not just be focused on cleaning toilets for visitors.

Reports and Updates

Being the last meeting of the current term, the Committees received several reports on work currently underway on the World Heritage property. These included:

Butchulla Aboriginal Corporation and the Butchulla Land and Sea Ranger team

The Committees were pleased to hear about the recent wongari (dingo) forum which was co-hosted by the BAC and the Queensland Government; the Central Station Redevelopment – which will provide a 'cultural base' for Butchulla tourism on K'gari; and the training being undertaken by the Butchulla Land and Sea Ranger (BLSR) Team to enable their participation in monitoring and responding to biosecurity issues such as myrtle rust. The BLSR team has also been delivering a pilot Junior Ranger program in conjunction with Urangan Point State School. The program has been well received by both students and teachers and has already generated several enquiries for it to be delivered elsewhere, teaching students about Butchulla culture, wongari safety and the World Heritage significance of K'gari.

Myrtle Rust Program

Dr Geoff Pegg reported on the training that had been provided to the BLSR both in Brisbane and on K'gari and the potential for this program to be rolled out elsewhere. Dr Pegg was pleased to report that Corey Currie from the BLSR would be presenting on the program at the World Heritage Forum being held in Canberra in September. Dr Pegg will also be meeting with the Chief Environmental Biosecurity Officer, Ian Thompson, in conjunction with Forum.

The Committees applauded Christine Royan's announcement that the \$30K funding that had been sourced for the myrtle rust program to date would be matched by the BAC.

Australian Heritage Grants

A discussion was led on the recently announced Australian Heritage Grant program and on the importance of achieving greater funding for projects with significance to the World Heritage property – such as the Climate Change Vulnerability Assessment and Adaptation Planning proposed earlier in the meeting.

The Committee sought additional advice on the number and types of applications that were eligible, with the recommendation that the Department of Environment and Science make at least two submissions (if eligible).

Great Sandy Ramsar Wetland

The Committees were briefed on the review of Great Sandy Ramsar Area Ecological Character Description and the upcoming Walking the Landscape process that the Queensland Wetlands Program would be running in conjunction with the Burnett Mary Regional Group.

Committee Wrap-Up

As it was the final meeting for the term, the Committees reflected on some the highlights of the term including the 25th Anniversary of World Heritage and also the sad loss of long-time member, Dr John Sinclair AO.

The Committees noted that despite their efforts on both the 2012-2015 and 2016-2019 terms, that there was **still no definitive estimate on K'gari visitation** and that this was a considerable issue – both for risk management and in funding arrangements for the property. **It was strongly suggested that this issue be resolved promptly.**

The Committees commended the Communiques as a tool between the Committees and both the State and Federal Ministers for the Environment and thanked the Ministers for their thoughtful responses and interventions during the Committees' term.

Finally, the Committees thanked the representatives from both the Queensland and Australian Governments, noting the greater collaboration that had been built with the Committees over the term and the positive results that had been achieved for the Fraser Island (K'gari) World Heritage property.