

FROM OUR ADVENTURE KOKODA FILES CIRCA 2009

Contents

Kokoda CEO Quits-Cites Intimidation	1
Kokoda: World Heritage or Military Heritage?	3
KTA CEO, response to ‘Kokoda: World Heritage or Military Heritage’ blog	5
Kokoda: Stop the bloody rot on the bloody track!	7
Background	7
Joint Understanding	8
Process	8
Outcomes	9
The Australian Trekker	9
The Koiari/Orokaiva Villager	9
Stakeholders	10
The Kokoda Honey-pot Effect	10
Ministerial Responsibility	11
Conclusion	11
Recommendation	11
Military Heritage at risk on the Kokoda Trail	11
Owers Corner Road	12
Kokoda Airfield	12
Conclusion	12
Action Required	13
Recommendations	13

Kokoda CEO Quits-Cites Intimidation

<https://web.archive.org/web/20140208090539/http://blog.kokodatreks.com/category/kokoda-trail-management/page/2/>

The news that the interim Executive Officer of the PNG Kokoda Track Authority, Annette Dean, quit her job and returned home to Tasmania is no surprise. She cited death threats, corruption and daily demands for money as the normal challenges she faced in her job. She needed a security escort to get from the carpark to her office in Boroko each day.

Annette’s credentials for the job were never in question but whoever made the decision that a white woman could work effectively in the KTA office environment in Boroko was naive in the extreme. They certainly did not listen to her predecessor, Warren Bartlett.

Warren, who has been in PNG for more than 40 years, ran the KTA office since the organisation was established in 2004. He faced two major challenges on a daily basis. One was running the entire trekking operation across Kokoda without any effective staff support. The other was dealing with an unqualified Board who used subtle and not so subtle methods of intimidation to get access to

substantial amounts of money from treks fees and elaborate scams with their wan-toks in local, Provincial and National government.

Neither the Australian nor PNG governments were interested in the management of the Kokoda Trail at that time. He was on his own.

Adverse public reaction to a proposal to mine part of the track caused them to focus on a solution to protect the military heritage of the area. By this time the Board had effectively misappropriated more than a million kina in Port Moresby and embezzled more than a quarter of a million more from the bank. Nothing was flowing through to the villages who were forced to compete amongst themselves for trekkers business along the track. It pitched brother against brother. Clan against clan. Village against village. Koiari against Orokaiva.

Within a short period of time committees, consultants and conferences became the order of the day as Canberra began the task of ‘assisting’ PNG to obtain a World Heritage listing for the Kokoda Trail and the Brown River Catchment Area. Most observers thought this was a bit ambitious in a country with a system of customary land ownership.

Working from the top down – as they do in Canberra – departmental bureaucrats visited villages along the track by helicopters to familiarize themselves with ‘village needs’.

- They ignored advice from trek operators who have been operating along the track for up to 20 years.
- They ignored previous research from village and stakeholder workshops and refused to continue that process.
- They refused to engage people with extensive experience in Melanesian culture and language.
- They refused to trek with established companies who focus on the military history of the Kokoda campaign in order to understand the significance of the pilgrimage.

It was soon apparent that Canberra was operating in a parallel universe. Trek operators were left to make their own arrangements as they conducted academic conferences in Canberra, took advice from armchair experts who once had a ‘Kokoda experience’, and continued to rotate people with no experience in Melanesian culture through the country.

After 15 months of frenetic activity not a single management measure has been implemented for the track. It could be argued that the system has regressed. The office is no longer accessible on a 24 hour basis and the link between villagers and management seems to have been broken.

Annette Dean’s departure is a wakeup call. Australia needs to draw a line in the sand and admit they have got it badly wrong over the past 15 months.

- They need to immediately cancel any plans for ‘experts’ scheduled to conduct track analysis and assess village needs.
- They need to engage people familiar with Melanesian language and culture. They need to identify clans and landowners along the track.
- They need to acknowledge that Kokoda is a military historical pilgrimage and not an exclusion zone for eco-evangelists.
- They need to work in partnership with trek leaders, clan leaders, landowners and Local/Provincial government officials.

They also need to acknowledge that Australia’s politically correct culture is not appropriate for Papua New Guinea.

Let's hope that Annette Dean's negative experience can be used in a positive way.

Kokoda: World Heritage or Military Heritage?

<https://web.archive.org/web/20140208090539/http://blog.kokodatreks.com/category/kokoda-trail-management/page/2/>

May 20, 2009

Kokoda is a powerful word. According to the Orokaiva 'koko' means place of skulls – 'da' is village. The combination of syllables conjures up thoughts of 'adventure' – mystery – danger' in the minds of sedentary beings.

And no wonder. Orokaiva warriors fearlessly resisted incursions into the Yodda valley when gold was discovered in the late 19th Century. Many early explorers and missionaries ended up in village cooking pots as they were stalked in the remote jungle-clad mountain ranges.

Then came the war. Kokoda was the first pitched battle fought against the Japanese. It signaled the beginning of a campaign where Australia's fate hung in the balance as our diggers fought a fanatical enemy, treacherous terrain, legions of deadly mites, malarial mosquitoes, venomous snakes – and cold fear.

But the enemy our commanders feared most was the ignorance of the armchair generals and bureaucrats. '*Build a road!*' – '*blow the Gap!*' – '*die at Imita!*' – they bellowed from the safety of cocooned offices in their parallel universe back in Australia. They didn't appreciate, from their limited knowledge of the ground and its intricacies, just what was needed to do the important job at hand.

Some things never change.

After decades of neglect by successive Australian Governments Kokoda is beginning to stir in our national consciousness. Political correctness, ridiculous OH&S laws and layers of social safety nets have all but transformed Australians into a risk averse society. 'Koko' 'da' now presents an opportunity for them to pay respect to the lives of our diggers – and give some meaning to their own.

Australians from all walks of life now want to walk in the footsteps of the brave and 'do it tough' as a mark of respect to a generation who grew from the challenge of adversity.

A common theme among those who take up the challenge is 'to do it like our diggers did it!' They don't want environmental boardwalks – they want mud. They don't want an eco-evangelical levitation – they want the historical hardship of the track. They don't want to be clean and green – they want to be dirty and sweaty. They don't want Kakadu – they want Kokoda! The Trek gives participants that special feeling that they are treading sacred ground, not without good reason!

But Kokoda is in danger of being transformed into a monument to environmentalism rather than a living memorial to our diggers. It shouldn't be "fenced off" but used in the proper way that befits its dedication to the memory of the brave sacrifices of the Australian and New Guinea defenders who trod this track during WWII. The custodians of our military history seem to have been sidelined in the process of developing the track between Owers Corner and Kokoda as a memorial trail.

In last year's five page 'Joint Understanding between PNG and Australia on the Kokoda Track (sic) and Owen Stanley Ranges' the word 'memorial' or 'battlesite' is not mentioned – once!

The document is peppered with the new language of the global warmers – 'carbon partnerships', 'national forest carbon accounting systems', 'future international emissions trading', 'REDD demonstration activities and global climate stability underpinning global eco-systems, etc. etc. etc'.

'Military heritage' has been replaced by 'World heritage'.

The Joint Understanding commits to 'deploying experts to the PNG Department of the Environment and Conservation to facilitate PNG Government processes to enable identification and consideration of a proposed World Heritage Site, etc. etc'. No mention is made of deploying military historians to identify battlesites sacred to our heritage, to dispatch bomb disposal experts to assess the dangers of

unexploded ordnance along the track, or experts from our War Memorial to establish a similar institution in Port Moresby. The preservation of our joint military heritage does not rate a mention.

It is easy to interpret 'joint understandings' between Australia and PNG as a euphemism for 'big brother'. It's OK for Australia to send 'experts' to PNG but we continue to deny them access to our seasonal markets even though our farmers have desperate labour shortages. It is easier for a PNG citizen to get a casual job in London than in Brisbane. Proper 'joint understandings' don't have one-way valves!

This fact is not lost on leaders in PNG.

Trekker numbers have grown exponentially over the years – from 76 in 2001 to more than 6000 in 2008. We watched as an inexperienced and unqualified authority was established to manage our sacred ground along the track. We watched as it morphed into a self-indulgent system of corruption. We have calculated the benefits to the PNG economy to be around \$15 million dollars in 2008 but we shy away from the fact that very little reaches the villages along the track. It is little wonder that landowners are attracted to mining and forestry opportunities.

The Australian – PNG Joint Understanding committed to 'addressing immediate needs for the 2008 trekking season and create interim Kokoda Track management arrangements'. This is the most important priority when the froth and bubble has been cleared from the document. But as thousands of Australians make the pilgrimage across the track we failed to meet this key commitment. Nothing happened.

And as we are now well into the 2009 trekking season and still nothing has happened!

Two trekkers have died. The track has been closed at Kovello. There is no proper trek permit system. There is no campsite booking system – or accreditation system. There is no need for a medical clearance. No need to submit a trek itinerary. No need for qualified expedition leaders. No requirement to carry satellite phones. No co-ordinated medical evacuation system. No minimum pay and conditions for PNG guides and trekkers. No community development program for villagers. Nothing.

Rumour has it that there is much feverish activity in the parallel universe of the Department of Environment, Heritage and the Arts in Canberra. This activity is obviously directed towards the application for a World Heritage Listing for the area.

It is time we said good bye to this well-intentioned but misguided concept.

It's time we refocused on the need to preserve and honour the military historical integrity of the Kokoda Trail. There are plenty of other areas in Papua New Guinea where eco-evangelists can get their rocks off. They should be encouraged to go and find them.

We need to take the following action steps to ensure Kokoda takes its proper place as a jungle shrine. We need to understand that it is the most significant pilgrimage an Australian can make in search of the qualities that define our national character.

We need to ensure departments entrusted with the preservation of our military heritage such as the Australian War Graves Commission, the Australian War Memorial, Defence and our ex-Service community have input into assisting our Papua New Guinean cousins to care for our sacred sites from the Pacific War.

We need to demonstrate that villages along the Kokoda Trail, and other battlesites throughout Papua New Guinea, will have a sustainable economic future as a result of our emerging interest in the Pacific War. This is key to the future of the track!

Kokoda is a pilgrimage for those who had a relative serve in the war. It is a 'rite of passage' for young Australians from different lands and cultures. It is a bridge for those who want to learn more about our military history and our Melanesian neighbours.

In the recent budget the Government announced \$10 million dollars to develop an interpretive trail in France and Belgium so that visitors to the area can understand the contribution and the sacrifice Australians made for freedom.

In the same budget absolutely nothing was allocated towards the development of an interpretive trail between Owers Corner and Kokoda!

For this reason alone the responsibility for the development of the Kokoda Trail as a National Memorial Trail should be transferred to the Australian War Graves Commission.

The Department of Environment, Heritage and the Arts should continue with their assistance to achieve World Heritage listings in partnership with their Papua New Guinea counterparts. There is much to be done to provide a sustainable alternative to the ravages of the logging and mining industries in the country. A review of Ministerial Media Releases indicates that these areas are their *raison d'être* – of the 340 media releases issued over the past 12 months only one refers to Kokoda!

Now we understand why the words ‘military heritage’ and ‘memorials’ were not included in the Joint Understanding signed over 12 months ago.

Now we understand why nothing has been done – apart from a few smoke and mirror demonstrations – across the Kokoda Trail during the past two trekking seasons.

Now we understand why the responsibility for the preservation of our military heritage along the Kokoda Trail has not been given the due attention it urgently needs it must be reallocated to the Office of the Australian War Graves Commission as a matter of priority.

Lest we Forget!

KTA CEO, response to ‘Kokoda: World Heritage or Military Heritage’ blog

<https://web.archive.org/web/20140208090539/http://blog.kokodatreks.com/category/kokoda-trail-management/page/2/>

May 19, 2009

My name is Rod Hillman and I am the current Chief Executive of the Kokoda Track Authority and feel it appropriate for me to say a few things.

1. I respect Charlie Lynn as a leader and for the work he has done both on the Kokoda Track and with his company Adventure Kokoda. I have met with Charlie and some of his tour leaders and believe we have a mutual respect. He has put together a strong and qualified team and whilst we don't always agree we do talk and discuss issues surrounding the Kokoda Track.
2. The Kokoda Track Authority (KTA) is a Papua New Guinean Special Purpose Authority. It is not Australian, nor should it be. The land belongs to the Papua New Guinean people, in the same way as Gallipoli belongs to the Turkish people and Villers-Bretonneux belongs to the people of France.
3. Australians pride themselves on “being there when a friend needs a hand” and respecting and honouring our soldiers’ ultimate sacrifice. I believe the work the KTA, tour operators, PNG Government and communities along the Track are working together towards this ideal, with significant financial and other support from the Australian Government.
4. The KTA is responsible for collecting the trek permit fees, managing the Track and distributing a proportion of the trek fees to the land owners. As such it is the day to day manager of the Kokoda Track and it is a KTA responsibility to develop systems to improve the trekker experience – whether through campsite bookings, itinerary planning, and accreditation of Tour Operators or developing training programs.
5. KTA's sole income is from Trekking Permit fees – no government or other ongoing assistance. It is a tight budget and there is a strong desire to put a significant proportion of the trek permit money into the land owners’ hands. It is their land and they should get some return.

6. Although funded by the Australian Government, I work for and take direction from the Papuan New Guinean KTA Management Committee and the PNG Government.

7. Annette Dean, the interim Chief Executive, didn't quit. She had a short term contract to fill the position whilst I tidied up my affairs in Australia before I could commence.

8. The Australian Government and the Australian people have a strong connection to, and a reverence for, the Kokoda Track. As such a joint understanding between the PNG and Australian Governments has been created to, among other objectives;

- An improved standard of living, quality of life, and access to basic services for communities along the Kokoda Track corridor.
- Improved opportunities for income generation, through the following:
- Sharing benefits from tourism on the Kokoda Track, through better distribution of trekking fees and development of local income generation opportunities (business and employment)
- Improved access to markets (transport) for other income generation opportunities
- The preservation of social and cultural values of the World War II route.
- The impacts of trekking are managed to deliver clear net environmental benefits for the Kokoda Track Communities.
- The World Heritage values of the Kokoda Track and Owen Stanley Ranges are understood and where appropriate, protected.

9. This Joint Understanding is supported through three programs; the KTA, the Kokoda Development Program (health, education, sanitation & water supply) and through support for the PNG Department of Environment. The financial commitment from Australia to the KTA includes;

- a. Two funded positions – The Chief Executive and an Operations Manager (both Australians).
- b. Funding a Business and Administration Manager (Local contract with KPMG)
- c. A proposed cash injection to undertake a range of urgent track maintenance projects
- d. The financial commitment is complemented by a range of support in administration and project management from the Canberra Office.

10. The KTA has a Management Committee (Board of Management) consisting of three heads of PNG Government Departments, four representatives of PNG Provincial and Local Level Government and two land owner representatives who provide valuable direction to the KTA management and connection to the PNG Government and local communities.

11. The KTA had serious misappropriation of funds in previous years and these monies have now been recovered, the amounts were approximately \$80,000. To prevent this happening again there is a completely new Board of Management, totally new staff and a significant management priority in preparing the policies, procedures and systems to prevent this re-occurring.

This commentary is to reassure the readers that the KTA takes its role very seriously and has a commitment to tour operators, trekkers and the local communities. We are all working towards preserving the memory of those soldiers in 1942, providing an experience for trekkers that is life changing and allows people to appreciate and understand the conditions the soldiers fought in and the sacrifice they made, for trekkers to learn of the people who live on the Track – ancestors of those who provided such unstinting support and to acknowledge and respect their ownership of the land.

I believe Charlie and I have similar visions for the future of Kokoda and I will continue to work with him, and all the other tour operators, to achieve these goals. Most of you have trekked with him or been involved in his life in some way. In many ways Charlie represents values that have, sadly, left mainstream Australia. His spirit of the larrikin, the total and unreserved trust of mateship and his strength of character is often harder to find than I once knew. The Kokoda Track needs people like Charlie (and his team) with their passion, commitment and knowledge.

Please judge the KTA on what it does in the future and not on what it used to do. If in a year there is the same mistrust and concerns then I would have failed and I will be brought to account accordingly.

Rod Hillman
Chief Executive
Kokoda Track Authority

Kokoda: Stop the bloody rot on the bloody track!

<https://web.archive.org/web/20140304101629/http://blog.kokodatreks.com/2009/06/01/490/#more-490>

June 1, 2009

A recent proposal to mine part of the Kokoda Trail caused a public outcry that resulted in the Australian government entering into a 'Joint Understanding' with the PNG Government to protect the track and its environs from possible mining or logging activity. Among the objectives is an agreement is to assist the PNG Government in undertaking a feasibility study for a possible World Heritage nomination.

The Minister for Environment, Heritage and the Arts was assigned responsibility for Australia's role and responsibilities in regard to the 'Joint Understanding'.

Whilst I believe the pursuit of a World Heritage listing is a noble goal it should not be at the expense of the historic military significance of the Kokoda Trail.

I believe the Kokoda Trail should be developed as a national memorial trail that reflects the military significance of the Kokoda campaign.

This should be separated from the feasibility study for a World Heritage nomination for the broader Owen Stanley Ranges and be reallocated to the Office of the Australian War Graves Commission.

Background

The Kokoda Trail had been virtually ignored by successive Australian governments since the end of the war in 1945. It was not until former Prime Minister Paul Keating attended the 50th anniversary of the Kokoda campaign in PNG in 1992 that it resonated again in our national consciousness.

Unfortunately the Department of Veterans Affairs had no vision and no plan for Kokoda at the time. On 18 February 2001 the Minister for Veterans Affairs, Bruce Scott MP, wrote: 'It will come as no surprise to you then that the 'Government Master Plan' of which you inquire 'for the development of the Kokoda Track as a national memorial park' does not exist '.

In spite of this official apathy public awareness increased with the publication of a number of best-selling books on Kokoda and the screening of television features.

Villagers along the track soon began to agitate for increased benefits from the emerging trekking industry. Prior to 2002 they did not have a co-ordinated forum to express their concerns so they took direct action and blocked the track in various places.

During negotiations to re-open the track after a lengthy blockage at Kovello a trek permit system was implemented and a trek fee of PNGK200 was introduced. The purpose of the trek fee was to ensure that villagers received shared benefits from the emerging trekking industry.

The PNG Kokoda Track Authority was established in 2004 and an Australian expatriate and former Kiap, Mr Warren Bartlett, was appointed as Chief Executive on a salary of A\$13,000. He was not allocated any staff.

A Board of Directors was appointed but they were not qualified for the role. The Board quickly became dysfunctional and more than a \$1 million was misappropriated.

Neither the Australian nor PNG governments displayed any interest in the dysfunction of the Authority until a proposal to mine a section of the Kokoda Trail became public.

The resultant outcry caused an over-reaction from the Australian government. It was obviously decided that the best protection against any future applications to mine or log any part of the trail would be to have it listed as a World Heritage site.

The Heritage Division of the Department of Environment, Heritage and the Arts was allocated responsibility for working with the PNG Department of Environment and Conservation to bring this about.

A new Board was appointed by the PNG Government and Australian representatives from the Department of Environment, Heritage and the Arts were assigned to work with the Authority and the PNG Department of Environment and Conservation.

Joint Understanding

A Joint Understanding covering 'both the sustainable development of communities along the Kokoda Track corridor, and protection and sustainable use of the natural and cultural resources of the broader Owen Stanley Ranges region' was signed on 23 April 2008.

The first hint of our 'big brother' approach is our refusal to use the official name as recorded on the statute books of the PNG Government i.e. 'The Kokoda Trail' (PNG Government Gazette No. 88 of 12 October 1972, page 1362, column 2. Notice 1972/28 of the PNG Place Names Committee refers).

Of more concern is the fact that the Joint Understanding does not contain any references to the military significance of the Kokoda Trail. The words 'Kokoda campaign – military history – memorials – battlesites – etc' do not rate a mention in the entire document. I regard this as a serious omission.

Process

From my viewpoint – as a trek operator, a trek leader with 55 crossings of the trail over the past 18 years, the son of a New Guinea veteran, a Vietnam Veteran with 21 years army service, and one with a long term interest in the preservation of the military history of the Kokoda campaign – the process seems to be seriously flawed thus far.

There has obviously been a lot of activity at the departmental level as representatives have been assigned to PNG and others have flown into villages by chartered aircraft to familiarise themselves with their needs.

There has also been much talk – a conference with academics in Canberra, superficial meetings with trek operators, and discussions with other 'stakeholders'. To date these have not yielded any identifiable outcomes along the track.

For example one of the objectives in the Joint Understanding was to 'address immediate needs for the 2008 trekking season and create interim Kokoda Track management arrangements'.

I have trekked Kokoda six times since April 2008 and I can report that not a single outcome has been achieved in this regard – and we are now well into the 2009 trekking season!

Another objective was to conduct 'an economic participation study to cover such options as agriculture, food services for trekkers, and participation in delivering development programs'.

Nothing has happened in this regard!

I have advised of the availability of an agricultural scientist who is fluent in Tok Pisin and Motu and has worked extensively in Melanesia. That person has written extensively on the needs of the Koiari and has previously worked for the (now-defunct) Koiari Development Corporation. He is currently living in semi-retirement in Australia and is willing and able to live in villages for extended periods of time to assist them with agricultural development and value-adding activities. He would also be able to provide valuable feedback on the cultural and environmental impact of the current trekking industry.

My requests to engage this person over the past 18 months have been ignored.

I understand AusAID has completed a survey of the Kokoda Trail but this has not been distributed to trek operators or villagers for comment. This is not conducive to an atmosphere of trust between the key stakeholders and the Department of Environment, Heritage and the Arts.

I could go on!

Outcomes

Whilst there has obviously been a great deal of departmental activity in regard to the Joint Understanding I can report that, after 15 months, there has not been a single outcome on the track. For example:

- There is no credible Trek Permit system in place
- There is no campsite booking system.
- There is no trek operator accreditation system.
- There is no standardised medical clearance form for trekkers.
- There is no co-ordinated system for medical evacuations in place.
- There is no campsite accreditation system in place.
- There is not a single environmental toilet between Owers Corner and Kokoda.
- There has been no attempt to identify clan leaders and landowners along the track.
- There has not been a single workshop in either the Koiari or Orokaiva areas on the track to identify villager needs.
- There is no minimum standard of pay and conditions for PNG trek guides and carriers.
- There is no training or development system in place to assist villagers to 'value-add' to the opportunities presented by trekkers passing through their villages.
- No action has been taken to identify (and make safe) unexploded ordnance along the trail.
- There is no plan to upgrade the road between Sogerri and Owers Corner to a safe all-weather standard.

The Australian Trekker

Australian trekkers make a significant commitment in both money and time when they decide to trek Kokoda. In return for this investment they need to be assured they will be safe and that they will learn about the military history of the Kokoda campaign; the culture of the Koiari and Orokaiva people along the track; and the physical environment.

They also expect to have hygienic toilet and ablution facilities at campsites along the trail.

Trekkers are the basic building block of a sustainable trekking industry along the Kokoda Trail. Without them there are no benefits for villagers to share. Unfortunately their needs have been ignored thus far.

The Koiari/Orokaiva Villager

The land in question is owned by traditional Koiari and Orokaiva landowners. The tracks connecting villages between Owers Corner and Kokoda have special significance to our military heritage because of the desperate campaign fought across it during the period 27 July to 2 November 1942.

Clans along the Kokoda Trail are the custodians of land sacred to our military heritage. They will protect and nurture our battlesites provided they receive benefits for doing so.

Villagers are currently missing out on significant potential earnings because they are yet to be taught the concept of 'value-adding'.

Teaching them to wash and dry trekkers gear, brew coffee, bake scones and produce village billum bags is not PhD stuff. This year they will miss out on the opportunity to earn at least PNGK 1 million because of a lack of basic training in these areas.

The construction of interpretative memorials at significant sites on their land will also provide them with an incentive to further 'value-add' to a trekkers Kokoda experience.

Stakeholders

There are many people and organisations of goodwill who want to do good things as a result of their Kokoda experience.

If this is harnessed in a co-ordinated way the PNG government would not have to spend any funds along the trail for education or health services. This would allow them to work with Provincial and Local Level Governments to support Koiari and Orokaiva villages in remote areas off the trail.

Currently there is no plan – and there is no co-ordination. The end result is that inappropriate memorial structures have been erected; inappropriate structures have been build for health and education purposes; and village children are showing signs of tooth decay because of the amount of lollies handed out.

Two recent examples indicate the state of planning flux in the Department of Environment, Heritage and the Arts:

- During the last two weeks of this month a team from the Kokoda Track Foundation was dispatched to Kokoda to do a ‘livelihood study’ in villages along the track. It seems that the PNG Kokoda Track Authority did not know they were doing it until they arrived in country. The Kokoda Track Foundation is a registered charity – their lack of experience with villagers along the track means they were ill-equipped for the task. Nobody seems to have been consulted on the tender process, the terms of reference; or the desired outcomes for the study.
- On 31st March we received a request to assist a company who has been asked to tender for a ‘Condition Analysis’ of the 96 Km Kokoda Trail. We do not know if the tender refers to today’s popular eco-tourist track; the wartime trail, the original route of the 39th Battalion; the eastern side of the Yodda Valley where the 53rd Battalion fought; or the connecting tracks to and from Lake Myola 1 and 2. We do not know what the terms of reference are, or the required outcomes. The company has been given 5 days time to submit their tender!

These studies are a sham and are obviously motivated by the need to spend money before the end of the current financial year. Neither study is related to an assessment of the military heritage of the trail; the needs of the paying customer i.e. the trekker; or the needs of villagers who will shortly be getting fed up with the number of inexperienced and ill-informed consultants asking banal questions about their needs and lifestyles.

Non-government, community and charitable organisations not involved in trekking should also be encouraged to direct their goodwill to village areas remote from the Kokoda Trail as part of a strategy to ensure shared benefits are more widely spread.

The Kokoda Honey-pot Effect

I first trekked Kokoda in 1991. In 1994 I submitted a paper on the need to develop Kokoda as a national memorial park. In 2000 I founded the Kokoda Track Foundation to develop a strategic plan for Kokoda. This was completed and presented to Prime Minister Sir Michael Somare and the Australian Minister for Veterans Affairs in 2006.

My purpose has always been to develop Kokoda as a model that could be used for other Pacific War battlesites in PNG – the Black Cat Track, Shaggy Ridge, Buna/Gona, Rabaul, etc.

Unfortunately everybody has flocked to Kokoda. There are now more than 30 trek operators and a myriad of other stakeholder organisations seeking to do ‘good things’ along the trail. It risks being overwhelmed with goodwill while nearby villages off the track are neglected. This has the potential to lead to dissent and disruption in the longer term. For example landowners on Mt Victoria are continually sabotaging the VHF communications tower.

We therefore need a strategic plan to get a proper balance in our approach to honouring the legacy of our soldiers, sailors, airmen and coastwatchers throughout New Guinea during the Pacific War.

Ministerial Responsibility

In the latest budget an amount of \$10 million was allocated to the Office of Australian War Graves Commission for the development of an interpretative trail in France and Belgium to honour the sacrifice of our veterans in WW1.

The same approach needs to be adopted for Kokoda which is our interpretative trail for WW11.

Conclusion

Kokoda is a national shrine. The trail between Owers Corner and Kokoda contains battlesites sacred to our military heritage. The expertise gained by the Office of Australian War Graves in the development and management of the interpretive trail in France and Belgium should be applied to Kokoda.

The Office of Australian War Graves should establish a close partnership with the Department of Environment, Heritage and the Arts who administer the Act that has Kokoda listed as an Overseas Area of Special Significance. The Department of Environment, Heritage and the Arts is also responsible for the broader long-term goal of working with the Government of PNG to achieve a World Heritage listing.

The Office of Australian War Graves should also work in partnership with PNG Tourism to develop models for visits and treks to other significant military historical sites throughout PNG.

Recommendation

I recommend that responsibility for the development of an interpretive trail between Owers Corner and Kokoda be transferred from the Department of Environment, Heritage and the Arts to the Office of Australian War Graves.

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Military Heritage at risk on the Kokoda Trail

[Blog posted by Charlie Lynn on 10 August 2009](#)

There is an urgent need for a re-assessment of Australia's role in the protection of our military heritage along the Kokoda Trail.

The construction of conventional buildings at Owers Corner and steel wire rope swing bridges across creeks at significant battlesites is akin to desecration of the most significant symbol of our involvement in New Guinea during the Pacific War.

Whilst Australia's assistance for the Owen Stanley Ranges to be listed as a World Heritage Area is a noble cause our commitment to the preservation of the military heritage of the Kokoda campaign is misguided. It is therefore urgent that responsibility for the development of Kokoda as a military interpretive trail be re-allocated to the Office of Australian War Graves.

This will allow the Department of Environment, Water, Heritage and the Arts to focus on its area of expertise in assisting the PNG Government to achieve a world heritage listing for the Owen Stanley Range.

In the meantime the Australian Government should immediately withdraw from any planned projects between Owers Corner and Kokoda. Any assistance should be limited to training local communities in appropriate social and community development in partnership with the PNG Department of Community Services.

Australian assistance in the short term should be restricted to the upgrade of the road between Sogeri and Owers Corner to all-weather capability and the upgrade of the Kokoda Airfield to accommodate a Dash-8 aircraft.

Owers Corner Road

The road between Sogeri and Owers Corner is a disgrace and unsafe in the wet – which is most of the time. The recent expenditure of trekkers' fees on urgent maintenance was a waste of money and akin to a misappropriation of these funds. If anybody is half-serious about sustainable tourism in PNG then the upgrade of this road should be an urgent priority.

Kokoda Airfield

At the other end of the trail the airfield at Kokoda is also a disgrace. The terminal consists of a concrete slab with a metal roof without walls. There is virtually no seating and no toilets. The paying customer, i.e. trekkers, deserve better.

Since 2001 more than 20 thousand Australians have invested around \$100 million to trek across the Kokoda Trail. The GST element of these funds would be sufficient to upgrade the road between Sogeri and Owers Corner and the airfield at Kokoda to safe and respectable standard.

The villagers between Owers Corner and Kokoda are now earning more income than ever before. More than \$1 million a year is received in wages and campsite fees. The next important step is to teach them how to work together for the greater benefit of their local communities. The proper PNG agency for this work is the PNG Department of Community Services but thus far they have never been consulted or approached.

There is scope for the villagers to increase their earning potential through the maintenance of the trail in preparation for each trekking season. Such maintenance should not be contracted out, as currently planned, because local people along the trail are more than capable of completing this type of work on their land.

In the last budget the Australian Government allocated \$10 million to the Office of Australian War Graves for the development of an interpretative trail in France and Belgium to honour the sacrifice of our World War 1 veterans. The work will be completed in time for the centenary of our ANZAC landings on the Gallipoli peninsula.

The Office of Australian War Graves has a proud record in regard to the development and maintenance of our war graves in foreign lands. The expertise they have, and will further attain as a result of the latest budget allocation, should be applied to the Kokoda Trail which is our World War 1 equivalent.

Conclusion

More detail is available in the following submissions which have been largely ignored this far:

- http://niusleta.kokodatreks.com/documents/StrategicPlanfortheKokodaTrailNoPics_000.pdf
- <http://niusleta.kokodatreks.com/documents/ADiscussionPaperontheKokodaEcoTrekkingIndustryNoPics.pdf>
- <http://niusleta.kokodatreks.com/documents/KTAReporbyPaulMitchell17November2006.pdf>
- <http://niusleta.kokodatreks.com/documents/ManagementFramework-KokodaTrackbyPaulMitchell.pdf>
- <http://niusleta.kokodatreks.com/documents/KTADiscussionPaperbyWarrenBartlettNovember2007.pdf>

Action Required

PNG Tourism should commission a research agency to determine why people trek Kokoda and what they would like to see in regard to the future development of the Kokoda Trail.

The PNG Kokoda Track Authority should be required to develop a proper management plan for trekking operations across the Kokoda Trail. This includes the certification of trek operators and campsites, the issue of trek permits, a medical insurance plan for PNG guides and carriers, the identification of landowners, a dispute resolution system, a website that allows for trekkers to provide comment on their experience, etc.

The PNG Central and Northern Provincial Governments should provide a plan for the upgrade of the road between Sogeri and Owers Corner and the Kokoda airfield.

The PNG Department of Community Services should prepare a plan for the development of Community Learning Development Centres in villages along the trail.

The Office of Australian War Graves should commission an interpretative memorial plan for the Kokoda Trail.

The impending LNG project in PNG, together with ongoing mining operations, will create heavy demands for airlines and hotels in Port Moresby. These are already at a premium during the trekking season. Kokoda trekkers (and other adventure tourism) needs should be addressed by PNG Tourism if they wish to develop the industry on a sustainable basis.

Recommendations

1. The Office of Australian War Graves be allocated responsibility for the development of an interpretative trail between Owers Corner and Kokoda.
2. The Australian Department of Environment, Heritage, Water and the Arts continue to work in partnership with the PNG Department of Environment and Conservation to achieve a World Heritage listing for the wider Owen Stanley Ranges.
3. PNG Tourism commission a study into the capacity of local airlines and hotels to meet the demand of eco-tourism.
4. The PNG Department of Community Services develop plans for the development of Community Learning Development Centres in villages along the trail.
5. The PNG Kokoda Track Authority developing a proper management plan for the Kokoda trekking industry.
6. PNG Tourism and the PNG Department of Community Services facilitate workshops in selected villagers in Central and Northern Province to determine village community needs and develop short and long term plans.