

# CHAPTER 32: Kokoda Trail Management - Chronology of Facts

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## **Preamble**

Interest in the Kokoda Trail lay dormant for 50 years until Paul Keating became the first Australian Prime Minister to visit the area in 1992. It was heightened with the opening of a significant memorial by Prime Minister John Howard on the 60th anniversary of the battle of Isurava a decade later, in 2002.

A proposal to establish a \$3 billion gold and copper mine on the southern section of the trail in 2006 saw the Australian Government react by establishing a Joint Understanding with the PNG Government to develop a case for a World Heritage Listing for the Owen Stanley Ranges. The agreement was framed around the need to protect the Brown River water catchment area on the trail as a possible water and hydro source for Port Moresby.

Responsibility was allocated to the Department of Environment as it was the responsible agency for World Heritage Listings as well as our national Register of Overseas Heritage Sites. 'Heritage' was later removed from its title as the department was later transformed to include Water, Sustainability, Energy, Population and Communities.

For some inexplicable reason the Department of Veterans Affairs (DVA) - which is the custodian of our wartime heritage via its agencies - the Australian War Memorial (AWM) and Office of Australian War Graves - was not included in the Joint Understanding.

Environment assumed control of the Kokoda Trail in 2008 however responsibility was transferred to DFAT in a reshuffle of responsibilities in 2015. There were no policy or operational changes as environmental officials in PNG were retained in their positions.

Since then the Kokoda Trail has been managed as a Government environmental project rather than as a wartime tourism enterprise with the military heritage of the trail being relegated.

## **Chronology of Facts**

### 2001

- In the decades since the war fewer than 100 trekkers crossed the Kokoda Trail each year. The combined annual income of subsistence villages along the trail was estimated to be in the region of \$30,000 in the 1990s.
- Media interest in the 50<sup>th</sup> and 60<sup>th</sup> anniversaries of the Kokoda campaign saw trekker numbers increase dramatically from 76 in 2001 to a peak of 5,621 in 2008.

### 2004

- The PNG Government established the Kokoda Track (Special Purpose) Authority<sup>ii</sup> (KTA) as a statutory body for the Kokoda and Koiari Rural Local-level Governments. Their primary role was to manage the emerging trekking industry to ensure villages along the trail received a fair share of benefits from it. Warren Bartlett, a former Kiap living in PNG, was appointed CEO on a PNG salary of \$12,500. A part-time assistant was engaged to assist him.

### 2006

- A proposal to mine the southern section of the trail resulted in an Australian Government offer to assist the PNG Government develop a case for a World Heritage listing for the Owen Stanley Ranges.

### 2007

- The Department of Environment and Heritage was reorganised as the Department of Environment and Water Resources.
- Environment officials and advisors were dispatched to PNG to familiarise themselves with the task of achieving a World Heritage Listing for the Owen Stanley Ranges.
- They were followed by a conga-line of consultants to advise Canberra on managerial, social, cultural, and environmental issues along the trail. Numerous stakeholder forums were conducted in Australia and PNG.
- For reasons known only to environmental officials they did not conduct any workshops/forums with the landowners in villages along the trail to allow for direct consultation with their

communities. Advice provided by experienced trek operators who had been engaged with villagers for almost two decades before their arrival was ignored.

## 2008

- The Department of Environment and Water Resources was reorganised as the Department of Environment, Water, Heritage and Arts (DEWHA).
- This created a departmental anomaly with DVA-DFAT being responsible for Australia's WW1 heritage at Gallipoli and the Western Front, and DEWHA-DFAT being responsible for our WW11 heritage at Kokoda and the Pacific.
- A [Joint Understanding](#) covering '*the sustainable development of communities along the Kokoda Track corridor, and protection and sustainable use of natural and cultural resources of the broader Owen Stanley region*' was signed by both governments in Madang on 23 April 2008.
- Military heritage is not a consideration for a World Heritage listing so it did not rate a mention in the Joint Understanding which noted that '*The Owen Stanley Ranges are one of PNG's major carbon stores and will be assessed along with other locations as potential sites for demonstration Reduced Emissions from Deforestation and Degradation (REDD) activities within the Papua New Guinea-Australia Forest Carbon Partnership*'.
- DEWHA1F<sup>iii</sup> assumed control of the Kokoda trekking industry. An Australian official, without any prior experience in PNG, was appointed CEO with a multimillion-dollar aid budget and a 10-fold increase in staff.

## 2009

- Responsibility for development along the Kokoda Trail was divided between AusAID which initiated a 'Kokoda Development Program', and DEWHA which initiated a 'Kokoda Initiative'. Both programs were focused on Kokoda but there was little coordination as they were responsible to different Departments in Canberra. Neither organisation saw fit to consult with local villagers or experienced trek operators – and there was little evidence of them consulting with each other.
- Soon after a \$1.5 million 'Village Livelihoods Project' conceived by DEWHA - without any consultation with the Department of Community Development in PNG or the Kokoda Track Authority - was imposed with the aim of assisting local villagers to earn additional income from trekkers. The program failed because it did not include consultation with trek operators who generate the income for the trekking industry. No additional income was earned by villagers and no additional crops were produced from local gardens to meet trekkers needs. When the failures became apparent it was quietly shelved.
- DEWHA officials then extended the definition of the Kokoda Trail to the 'Kokoda Track Corridor' - and later to the 'Kokoda Track Region' which then included areas further afield such as Sirinumu Dam on the South Coast and the beach-heads of Buna and Gona on the North Coast. This subtle rebranding provided a smorgasbord of opportunity for Canberra based officials, academics and consultants involved in social mapping, gender equity studies, capacity building, mentoring and social inclusion.

## 2010

- DEWHA was rebranded as the Department of Sustainability, Environment, Water, Population, and Communities (DSEWPC). Heritage was removed from their title however the role of environmental officials in PNG was not affected.

2011

- A [Strategic Plan2F](#)<sup>iv</sup> developed by PNG based DSEWPC officials for the period 2012 – 2015 comprised 5 strategies and 33 objectives. The plan was once again developed without consultation with experienced Kokoda trek operators. Not one of the five strategies or any of the 33 objectives was achieved! No follow-up strategic plan has been developed since then.

2012

- DSEWPC transferred responsibility for the management of the trail to the PNG Department of Conservation, Environment and Climate Change without having developed a single management protocol. No legislation had been developed. No local landowner groups had been incorporated. No dispute resolution mechanisms had been put in place. No due diligence systems were put in place for licensing trek operators. No village workshops had been conducted. Not a single campsite was certified. Not a single toilet along the entire trail met the most basic of hygiene standards. No audited financial reports were ever published. No campsite booking system or trek itinerary management systems were introduced.
- Trekker numbers and income earning opportunities for local village communities declined significantly as a result of these management deficiencies during their watch.

2014

- DSEWPC was reorganised into the Department of Heritage and Water (DHW) and later as the Department of Environment (DoE) with the election of the Coalition Government.
- The ‘Kokoda Development Program’ and the ‘Kokoda Initiative’ were amalgamated within DFAT PNG under the watch of the Minister for International Aid and the Pacific. There were no staff changes – environmental officials recruited by DEWHA/DSEWPC/DHW continued in their roles in pursuit of a World Heritage Listing for the Kokoda Trail without interruption.

2015

- [Australian World Heritage expert, Dr Peter Hitchcock AM exposed the fallacy of achieving a World Heritage Listing3F](#)<sup>v</sup>: ‘Given the on-going threat to heritage values by mining and other development activities, no part of the Kokoda Track and Owen Stanley Ranges Tentative Listed area should be considered for formal nomination as a World Heritage area until such time as an adequate extent of high value areas is formally protected. Given this prerequisite, it may be years before a suitable tract of land is protected and worth considering for World Heritage nomination.’
- Environment-DFAT produced a ‘Master Plan for the Kokoda Trail’ based on three pillars: The Track – The People – The Environment.<sup>4F</sup><sup>vi</sup> ‘Commemoration’, which is the core reason Australians pay to trek across it, was excluded from their plan.
- The word ‘[mateship](#)’ was replaced with ‘[friendship](#)’ in the official agreement for the Kokoda Trail between Australia and PNG<sup>5F</sup><sup>vii</sup>.

2017

- The PNG Government announced a \$263 million [Edevu Hydro Project on the Brown River6F](#)<sup>viii</sup> to meet the future water and power needs for Port Moresby. The project, to be developed by the China Gezhouba Group Corporation and the East Vision Group, is scheduled for completion in 2020.
- The Edevu Hydro Project has negated the need for a World Heritage Listing to protect the Brown River Catchment Area.

- The PNG Prime Minister Peter O’Neill ordered a review of the KTA due to the dysfunction of the management systems put in place by DEWHA/DSEWPC/DWH/DoE/DEE officials.

2019

- The [2019 Annual Report of Environment-DFAT PNG7F<sup>ix</sup>](#) focused on issues relating to gender equity, access for people with disabilities, and social inclusion along the trail. There is no mention of the need for a Military Heritage Interpretation Plan or sustainable economic development for local villagers.

2020

- COVID-19 resulted in the shutdown of the Kokoda trekking industry and the evacuation of Australian officials from PNG.
- No financial reserves had been established to support local villagers engaged in the Kokoda trekking industry in the event of an emergency during the period 2008-2019.
- No financial reports were ever published by the KTA under DEWHAs watch which is in breach of the PNG Investment Promotion Authority Act.
- No plans have since been put in place to provide villagers with interim employment opportunities via the siting and development of campsites and trail maintenance to meet new social distancing and hygiene criteria that will apply post Covid-19.
- No action has been initiated to identify-establish Incorporated Landowner Groups (ILGs) across the trail as a means of transferring ownership of the Kokoda trekking industry to them.
- As of July 2020 the KTA, which has operated under the watch of Environment-DFAT for the past two decades, has no income stream; nothing in the bank; a significant office rental debt; and staff who have not been paid for the past two pay periods.
- Prime Minister Scott Morrison, who trekked Kokoda in 2009, intervened – the issue was elevated to PM&C; a Project Reference Group has been established by the Department of Veterans Affairs; and an accredited Australian military heritage architect has finally been engaged to develop a Master Heritage Action Plan for the Trail.

2021

- An exposè by [PNG blogs on this link](#) on 25 March 2021 has revealed:

*‘His (Minister for Environment, Conservation and Climate Change) Department of Environment and Conservation (DEC) changed to the Conservation and Environmental Protection Agency (CEPA), which is alleged to have been established to assist a mafia-style network to suck up public money under the management of former Environment & Conservation Secretary Wari Iamo, indisputably the most corrupt official that DEC has ever hosted. Current Secretary Gunther Joku, brother of the infamous West Papuan Franzalbert Joku who had his own lengthy time milking government funds into his personal pocket, is collaborator with Dr Wari Iamo, along with their Australian friend and strategist Andrew Taplin. More than K3 million was budgeted for the DEC to CEPA transition, now how could it cost this much and where did the money disappear to? Minister Pundari should know. The money was raised internally by transferring money from one account to another especially from the funds allocated under developmental (PIP) budgets, projects undertaken through joint-bilateral agreements like Kokoda Track Initiatives and Coral Triangle Initiatives (CTI), and further purged from the recurrent budgets. Minister Pundari signed off on*

*all this.*

*'This money was systematically (without detection) diverted in 2011 The money went into the pockets of fly-in fly-out consultancy services from Australia, including a few PNG friends.'*

One of those 'friends' was the former CEO of the Kokoda Track Authority who was patronised with trips to Australia, some with his wife and family. These came to an end after a bitter dispute between the CEO and the Australian Senior Management Advisor in CEPA.

### **Summary of Australian Government Management Outcomes for the Kokoda Trail: 2008-2021**

- During the period 2004 – 2008, under PNG local management, trekker numbers increased by 255% from 1,584 to 5,621.
- Under Australian Government administration via DEWHA/DSEWPC (2008-2012) trekker numbers declined by 36% from 5,621 to 3,597 despite a 10-fold increase in staff and a multimillion-dollar Aid budget.
- This decline has continued with a further decrease of 16% from 3597 in 2013 to 3033 in 2018.
- There is not a single management protocol in place for the Kokoda trekking industry.
- The overall decline in trekker numbers as a result of the management system put in place by Environment-DFAT officials in PNG has resulted in a loss of \$15 million in tourism revenue for PNG; a loss of 70,000 working days for PNG guides and carriers; and a loss of \$500K for campsite owners along the trail.

### **Kokoda Trail Military Heritage Factors**

DVA-DFAT is responsible for Australia's WW1 military heritage at Gallipoli and the Western Front.

Environment-DFAT PNG is responsible for our WW11 military heritage at Kokoda and the Pacific.

DVA is responsible for the Australian War Memorial (AWM) which is the custodian of Australia's military heritage.

Papua and New Guinea were Australian mandated territories in 1942 and are therefore included within DVAs charter.

For reasons known only to Environment-DFAT officials the AWM was excluded from the process of developing a Master Military Heritage Plan for the Kokoda Trail until Prime Minister Morrison's intervention in late 2020.

DVA was also excluded from the process of recruiting a National Military Heritage Advisor for DFAT in PNG.

DFAT PNG advertised the position during the peak Christmas-New Year holiday period from 22 December 2017 – 8 January 2018. The advertisement was restricted to a small number of institutions who were closed during the holiday period. Both the AWM and the RSL were excluded from the process of tendering for the position.

The successful applicant was a PNG based American anthropologist whose thesis for his Doctorate was '*Ambivalent Empire" Indigenous and Colonial Historicities in the Trobriand Islands, 1832-1941*'.

The American anthropologist had no prior military historical credentials which was evident in his ‘Kokoda Track Military Heritage Management Plan’<sup>8F</sup> where he stated:

*‘The Plan will also recognise the prominent roles of Japan and the USA in PNG’s war history, as well as the place of other nations, including the UK, India, Fiji, China, Korea, Taiwan, etc’.*

Those familiar with our military history are aware that ‘*the UK, India, Fiji, China, Korea, Taiwan, etc*’ were not involved in the Kokoda campaign or any other campaigns in Papua or New Guinea during the war!

The plan itself is a simplistic document, lacking the detail required of a proper Military Heritage Interpretation Plan. The document is a paltry 16 pages (with liberal use of graphics to achieve this). It provides no comfort that any real outcomes to protect, honour and interpret our wartime heritage across the Kokoda Trail will be achieved.

It is also worthy of note that Environment-DFAT have failed to develop a single memorial along the Kokoda Trail since they assumed responsibility for it 11 years ago. They also failed to acknowledge our wartime heritage in their 2019 Annual Review of the ‘[Papua New Guinea–Australia Governance Partnership Quality and Technical Assurance Group Final Report](#)’.

## The Way Forward

The following action steps are required to properly protect, honour, and interpret our shared wartime heritage across the Kokoda Trail:

1. Transfer responsibility for the military heritage management of the Kokoda Trail from Environment-DFAT to DVA-DFAT;
2. Develop a [Joint Understanding for Commemoration](#) of the Shared Wartime Heritage between PNG and Australia
3. Seek the support of the PNG Government to transfer responsibility for the Kokoda Trail, which is their most popular tourism destination, from the Conservation Environment Promotion Authority (CEPA) to the Tourism Promotion Authority (TPA) so it can be managed as a wartime tourism asset by a business enterprise rather than an environmental asset by Government.

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<sup>i</sup> The author has trekked across the Kokoda Trail 99 times over a period of 29 years. He served in the Australian Army (1965-1986) and the NSW Parliament (1995-2015). In 2015 he was inducted as an Officer of the Logohu (OL) by the PNG Government in their New Years’ Honours List ‘for service to the bilateral relations between Papua New Guinea and Australia and especially in the development of the Kokoda Trail and its honoured place in the history of both nations’ over the past 25 years. He was appointed Parliamentary Secretary for Veterans Affairs in NSW and was awarded and OAM for his services to the Parliament. He has made numerous submissions to the Australian Government over the past two decades in support of the development of a Master Plan for the Kokoda Trail.

<sup>ii</sup> [Special Purpose Authorities are established to serve the interests of landowners of Mining and Petroleum impact project areas](#). EMTV Report

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iii 'Heritage' was eventually dropped from the Department which was rebadged as the Department for Sustainability, Environment, Water, Population and Communities (DSEWPC)

iv <https://blog.kokodatreks.com/2020/03/09/ka-strategic-plan-2012-2015-fail/>

v <https://www.sprep.org/attachments/VirLib/PNG/world-heritage-sites-png.pdf>

vi Kokoda Initiative Master Plan by Trip Consultants August 2015

vii <https://www.environment.gov.au/heritage/publications/papua-new-guinea-australia-joint-declaration-preservation-kokoda-track-region>

viii <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2017-02-06/hydro-project-to-boost-port-moresbys-energy-supply/8245900>

ix 2019 Annual Review Report Papua New Guinea–Australia Governance Partnership Quality and Technical Assurance Group Final Report

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[https://www.academia.edu/37661061/KOKODA\\_TRACK\\_Military\\_Heritage\\_Management\\_Plan\\_Papua\\_New\\_Guinea\\_National\\_Museum\\_and\\_Art\\_Gallery](https://www.academia.edu/37661061/KOKODA_TRACK_Military_Heritage_Management_Plan_Papua_New_Guinea_National_Museum_and_Art_Gallery)