

## Chapter 7: A Review of the Kokoda Track Authority

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### Kokoda Track Special Purpose Authority (KTA)

The Kokoda Track Special Purpose Authority was initially conceived as a mechanism for solving disputes along the Kokoda Trail. During the mid to late '90s the track was often closed by landowners seeking some form of compensation and it was clear that there was no person or organization with the authority to deal with them. This was a major impediment to the development of an eco-trekking industry as trek operators were unable to book treks with any degree of certainty. At one stage the track was closed for more than 12 months.

This idea of imposing a trek fee which would be paid to a representative landowner body to coordinate activities along the track and to help deliver programs to villages and clans which would provide shared benefits was proposed and accepted.

The basic rationale was that if a rebel landowner blocked the track and therefore prevented others from receiving the benefits of trek fees, village campsite fees, food and employment for porters and guides then they would resolve the problem with that particular landowner.

The Kokoda Track Special Purpose Authority (KTA) was proclaimed by the PNG Government with representatives from landowners, local and provincial government, the PNG Tourism Promotion Authority, the National Cultural Commission and tour operators.

### Trek Fees

The purpose of introducing trek fees for the Kokoda Track Authority was therefore to provide the organization with an independent income stream to:

- cover the administrative costs of managing the authority
- coordinate the needs of eco-trekkers and village communities along the track;
- provide small scale development programs that will deliver shared benefits to villagers along the track; and
- provide a dispute resolution mechanism for disgruntled landowners.

### Administration of the KTA

The current CEO of the KTA, Warren Bartlett, his Chairman Mr Alfred Amuli and his Vice-Chairman, Mr Gary Imri are to be congratulated for their exceptional work in establishing the organization and in working with local communities to establish their needs. The achievements of the KTA in facilitating workshops in Efogi and Kokoda; in conducting 'awareness patrols' across the track; in coordinating the clean up of the track with the assistance of landowners; and of delivering small scale projects to villages in such a short time has been quite remarkable.

With the increasing numbers of trekkers arriving in PNG to trek across the Kokoda Trail it is timely to review the operation of the KTA to ensure it is able to meet the growing needs of the various stakeholders. The administrative issues requiring consideration are:

- **Staff**

The administrative workload required to coordinate an anticipated 2000 trekkers in 2006 is significant. In the past year this has been carried out by the CEO, Warren Bartlett but the increasing workload has created an urgent demand for additional staff on the KTA.

Consideration should be given to employing an administrator, a secretary with advanced computer skills, a field officer and at least three trek rangers. A list of their likely responsibilities is attached.

Trek rangers need to be employed to ensure both trek operators and trekkers pay their trek fees, to monitor trekking activity and to liaise with local communities along the track.

- **Office**

The current office location at Sogeri was only meant to be an interim solution until the KTA was operational. There is an urgent need for the KTA to acquire its own office space in or near Port Moresby to allow it to function effectively.

The KTA also needs a Branch Office in Kokoda to co-ordinate activities on the northern side of the range.

- **Vehicle**

It is also recommended that the KTA procure a suitable vehicle for administrative use.

It is important that the KTA understands that the income derived from trek fees is to allow for the proper administration and coordination of eco-trekking across the track. The income derived from

trekkers paying village fees, employing guides and porters and purchasing fruit, vegetables, bilum bags, etc will provide considerable economic benefits for them.

It is also important for the KTA to be fully transparent in the management of the trek fees and other funds it receives.

There is a danger that some members of the KTA might regard the trek fees as a means of funding various projects in villages and not allow enough for the authority to meet its administration responsibilities in the form of office space, administrative staff, trek rangers, vehicle operation and administrative expenses.

The KTA should therefore be required to produce an annual budget for presentation to the Board. It should also produce an annual report for distribution to local and provincial government authorities, trek operators, clan leaders, landowners and other stakeholders.

### Code of Ethics for KTA Directors

The issue of Director's responsibilities also needs to be addressed. A recent incident at the Gateway Hotel in Port Moresby (see attached report) where two heavily intoxicated Directors physically and verbally assaulted the Chairman, Vice-Chairman and CEO of the KTA should not be tolerated.

The resolution to settle the issue in the 'Melanesian way' which involved an apology from the two intoxicated Directors and a payment of K350 as compensation to the Chairman and Vice-Chairman from KTA funds should not be accepted practice in the future.

The KTA therefore needs to establish a code of ethics for the Directors of the authority with appropriate disciplinary measures for those who do not comply with it.

### Collection of Trek Fees

Whilst it is anticipated that approximately 1800 people, mostly Australians, will trek across the Kokoda Trail in 2005 it is worth noting that many of them will not pay the K200 trek fee. It is evident that the KTA does not currently have the legislative authority or the personnel support to enforce the collection of fees from rogue operators.

One of these rogue Australian operators refuses to accept the legitimacy of the KTA and refuses to pay trek fees. Because this operator is a major tourism agent for PNG it seems the relevant authorities are reluctant to enforce her to pay the backlog in fees owing which is now estimated to be in the region of K200,000. It seems incredible that an Australian tour operator can treat the PNG Government with such contempt by not accepting the legitimacy of a legally constituted Kokoda Track Special Purpose Authority.

It is also grossly unfair on the other trek operators who are meeting their obligations and paying their trek fees in accordance with the requirements of the KTA.

The KTA needs the following support to ensure that all trek operators and trekkers pay the appropriate trek fee:

- Legislation. Appropriate legislation which allows the KTA, or their authorized representatives on the track, to physically stop groups or individuals who have not paid their trek fees from trekking Kokoda.
- Rangers. A KTA Ranger needs to be employed at both ends of the track i.e. Ower's Corner and Kokoda, and in Efogi Village, to check that each trekker has an authorized trek permit. The Rangers can also be employed on other liaison duties on behalf of the KTA. The

Rangers should be empowered to enforce the appropriate laws which would prevent any person from trekking along the track without an official trek permit.

### VHF Radio Base Station

A VHF radio net has now been established in all villages along the track. The traffic on the radio net is already very heavy and can be expected to increase. The KTA needs to establish a VHF Base Station in their office and control the net.

The KTA Administrator would take control of the net in the event of any emergency and would act as a liaison officer between the critical point and any medical/rescue service in PNG.

### Track Camp Sites

The campsites along the track are totally unsatisfactory for the increasing numbers of trekkers. The following items require urgent attention.

- Toilets. The most **urgent** need is for proper environmental toilets to be established at each campsite. The minimum requirement is for five toilets at each site (two for porters/guides, two for male trekkers and one for females).
- Ablution Blocks. These need to be established for male and female trekkers to allow them to shower, wash and clean their cooking/eating utensils. Trekkers currently using the rivers and creeks with soaps and detergents will cause unnecessary pollution to these pristine areas if these are not established.

### Campsite Booking System

The KTA is the controlling and coordinating authority for the trek. The increasing trekker numbers anticipated for the Anzac period in 2006 has created an urgency for the establishment of a campsite booking system. There were more than 300 trekkers on the track during April 2005 to attend Anzac Services at Bomana and Isurava. These numbers will increase in 2006. Currently many of the campsites are not large enough for more than one or two groups. If people are not able to camp in a predetermined location it will lead to disputes between trek operators, trek groups and local landowners.

Trek Operators should be required to present their trek itineraries to the KTA by 31 January 2006 for the Anzac period to allow the KTA to schedule the bookings accordingly or have additional campsites established with proper toilet and ablution facilities to meet the anticipated demand. This is an urgent requirement.

### Rubbish

Increasing numbers of trekkers results in increasing quantities of rubbish on the track. Trek Operators should be required to carry their rubbish out to Efogi or Kagi Village for transport back to Port Moresby on a charter used to preposition food for the various trek groups.

The KTA should also initiate at least two clean up patrols across the track each year. Trek operators could be asked to contribute to the patrols by funding a couple of the porters/guides they use and providing them with backpacks.

### Dispute Resolution

There has been an ongoing dispute at Myola for the past three years which has prevented trekkers from using it. This has meant a considerable loss of income for the landowners over this period. It is interesting that the Australian trek operator who refuses to cooperate with the KTA and who refuses to pay trek fees is allowed to camp at the Myola guesthouse. All other trek operator who pay their trek fees in advance are not permitted to camp at this site.

A new campsite was therefore established at Lake Myola 2 as an interim measure and there is now a dispute over this one as well.

It is difficult for trek operators who advertise a trek itinerary in Australia to be thwarted at the last minute because of these types of local disputes. Trek operators need more certainty if they are going to invest in marketing and planning treks.

The KTA should seek a formal enforceable agreement with landowners of campsites along the way and should have the legislative authority to enforce the agreements once they are signed off.

### Village Cooperatives

Trek leaders currently have to carry significant amounts of cash with them on the trek to pay landowners for the campsites. It is not always clear that the right person is being paid and disputes sometimes occur.

Consideration should be given to establishing village cooperatives with bank accounts in Port Moresby. Each village should be invited to provide porters, guides and campsites for groups which register with the KTA. The trek operator can then pay the KTA for their campsite fees at the same time they pay for their trek permits. This can then be deposited into the village cooperative bank account. The village clan leaders/landowners would then apportion the money as decided by their local clans.

Such a system would be transparent as numbers can easily be checked against the number of trek permits issued. A summary of trekker numbers and amounts disbursed would be included in the KTA Annual Report.

### Code of Conduct for Trek Operators

It would be desirable for the KTA to work towards the development of a code of conduct for trek operators. Issues such as minimum rates of pay for guides and porters; the maximum weight to be carried; the removal of rubbish from the track; recommended gratuity at the end of a trek and the provision of basic camping gear such as a sleeping bag and mat should be addressed and agreed to by trek operators.

### Training of Guides and Porters

Consideration should be given to the accreditation of guides and porters. Plans should be prepared to have them trained in remote area first aid, communications, field cooking, field hygiene, environmental and cultural awareness, military history and expedition leadership.

Accredited guides and porters should also be required to have a personal bank account to allow the Tour Operator to place all or part of their pay directly into it. This would negate the need for large sums of cash to be carried at the end of the trek and would prevent them from being shortchanged by their own trek leaders.

### Kokoda Jungle Marathon

The introduction of a race across the track by Gail Thomas of Kokoda Trekking is a great initiative and should be supported and promoted by the PNG Tourism Promotion Authority. Reports from the inaugural race indicate it was well organized and provided a great deal of excitement amongst the village communities along the track. Events such as this are a great morale booster for the local people. It has the potential to provide international exposure for the track and the locals participating in the event.

### Threats to Kokoda

The following threats need to be addressed by the KTA to protect the environmental, cultural and historical integrity of the Kokoda trekking experience:

- **Governance.** It is imperative that the KTA have proper and transparent policies and procedures to ensure the fees received from trek operators are spent in accordance with an approved budget and that any funds expended by the authority or by individual directors are fully accountable.
- **Mining.** The recent establishment of a goldmine in the vicinity of Ofi Creek is detrimental to the establishment of a sustainable eco-trekking industry along the track. The crossing at Ofi Creek, once a pristine environment, is now polluted. The existence of survey markers on the southern side of the Maguli Range is a major concern.
- **Forestry.** Logging concessions are reported to have been granted over the southern end of the track. There is no greater danger to an eco-trekking industry than logging operations in the vicinity of the track.
- **Trekkers.** The current system does not have any restrictions on the numbers of trekkers arriving at any particular time. The KTA itself is unaware of the arrival of certain groups or of their itinerary. This laissez-faire system has the potential to create conflict between tour operators, trekking groups and the local landowners which would eventually lead to bad publicity. A trek booking-system should be developed by the KTA as a matter of urgency.
- **Disease.** The lack of adequate toilets and ablution blocks creates an environment for disease to be spread quickly between trekkers. This will in turn lead to negative publicity.

### Koiari Holdings Limited

An administrative partnership with Koiari Holdings should be considered as they have spare office space at 9-mile and some key staff that are underutilized. The KTA should consider leasing some office space and sharing the costs of an administrator, a secretary and a vehicle. The Field Officer could also be shared between the two organisations.

### AusAID

The initiative for the development of an eco-trekking industry based on the Kokoda campaign has come from The Kokoda Track Foundation which has worked closely with the KTA in funding workshops, working with external agencies with expertise in self-sustaining eco-tourism, establishing steering committees to develop a strategic plan and engaging a consultant to prepare the plan.

An integral part of the strategic plan, which we hope to have finalized by December 2005 for presentation to the Australian and PNG Governments, is the funding requirement for its implementation.

The rapid increase in the numbers of trekkers using the track has overtaken our current timetable. It would therefore be of immense help if AusAID were able to agree to assist with the funding of the CEO and a Field Officer for a period of three years. The other positions (Administrator, Secretary and Rangers) could continue to be funded from the monies received from trek fees.

The CEO position is held by Mr Warren Bartlett. The Field Officer is Mr Sandy Lawson who was previously employed by Koiari Holdings – he is an agricultural scientist and is fluent in Tok Pisin and is able to converse in Motu.

### Conclusion

It is clear that the KTA needs to redefine its role and direct more of its funding towards additional personal and administrative resources it needs to properly manage trekking activities along the track.

Given that the Kokoda Trail is becoming such an iconic symbol for an increasing number of trekkers we have a duty to protect its environs and ensure proper organizational procedures are put in place. This can only happen with an effective organizational structure backed by appropriate legislation to ensure the needs of trekkers, landowners, clan leaders and village communities are satisfied in such a way that all parties benefit from the emerging industry.

Until the organization has the resources to address the challenges that lay ahead it would be advantageous if AusAID were to undertake to provide assistance by funding the employment of the CEO for the KTA and an Australian Field Officer to work with village communities.

Charlie Lynn  
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