



Illegal Kokoda Blockade: Timeline & Consequences for Kokoda Tourism

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Background

The Kokoda Trail had been subject to random blockades by village-based landowners over the past 15 years due to the dysfunction of the management system imposed on them by Canberra environment officials. Most are expressions of frustration over their failure to receive a fair share of benefits from Kokoda tourism across their traditional land.

The recent blockade by a group of dissident Port Moresby-based landowners will add to their angst as they will now be denied up to K2 million in lost jobs and earnings during the peak September-October trekking period.

Of more concern is the fact the dissident Port Moresby-based landowners have not expressed any intention to share any compensation they claim is owed to them by government’s closure of the Kodu goldmine 15 years ago with any of their *wan-tok* communities along the Kokoda Trail, or invest in any initiatives that will enhance the value of pilgrimage tourism.

They are also aware the Kodu gold deposit is not on the Kokoda Trail but they are being held to ransom by their Port Moresby based *wan-toks*.

There is no evidence of the lucky few sharing any of the reported K10 million they received as compensation in 2013 after they relocated from Nauro village to Port Moresby and there have been no suggestions they will share any future compensation windfalls with them.

The action of the dissidents has damaged PNG's international reputation as a reliable tourism destination which will result in fewer tourists and a further decline in pilgrimage tourism across the Kokoda Trail.

The blockade has also exposed the impotence, incompetence, and dysfunction of government agencies charged with the management of the Kokoda Trail. These include the Canberra funded 'Kokoda Initiative', the Department of Provincial and Local-Level Government Affairs (DPLLGA), the Conservation Environment Protection Authority (CEPA); the Tourism Promotion Authority (TPA); and the Kokoda Track Authority (KTA). Management is exercised through a KTA Board appointed by the Minister for Provincial and Local-Level Government and a Kokoda Initiative Committee (KIC) appointed by the Minister for Conservation, Environment and Climate Change.

The Minister for Tourism, Arts and Culture has been relegated to membership of both KTA Board and the KIC Committee.

The resultant decision-making paralysis is evident in the fact that while the Police Commissioner declared it to be illegal nobody took any action to arrest those responsible for it – apart from having another committee meeting of sorts!

Their decision making ability is further hampered by the fact that none have ever trekked across it with a professional group and therefore lack an appreciation of the value of pilgrimage tourism and its positive impact on international tourists. It's certainly not something that can be gained from a seat behind a computer screen in Port Moresby - nor can it be conveyed in the comfortable settings of committees, forums, or workshops.

We can only hope the recent appointment of Hon Belden Namah as Minister for Tourism, Arts and Culture will be the catalyst for having the Kokoda Trail managed as a commercial enterprise for the economic benefit of the traditional landowner communities across it. Belen Namah has a reputation as an 'action man'. He is a graduate of the Royal Military College, Duntroon so he can be expected to have a keen appreciation of the value of pilgrimage. He was also an action leader during the [Sandline Crisis](#) in 1996 and later served as Deputy Prime Minister.

The following timeline provides an opportunity of a case study for the Minister to bring order to the current chaotic management system.

16 September 2024: DFAT Smartraveller Alert

An unexpected DFAT Smartraveller alert advised:

'Landowner blockades on the Kokoda Track may disrupt treks. Check with your trekking company for the latest information.'

Kokoda tour companies were not aware of any disruption to their trekking schedules as they had not received any advice of such a possibility from the Kokoda Track Authority (KTA) who had issued trek permits to those leading groups across the Trail.

17 September 2024: CEO KTA Announcement of Kokoda Trail Closure

Without any warning the Acting CEO of the Kokoda Track Authority (KTA), Julius Wargirai, announced a blockade had been established at Nauro village:

‘All be advised that due to the blockade along the Kokoda Track on 16th September 2024 at Nauro I village, the full track of 96km is now closed as of 17th of September, 2024 until further notice. This means there will be no trekking activities taking place on the track.

‘The blockade of the track is due to Mount Kodu Landowner Association demanding the government to honor its commitment in paying outstanding royalty so that normal trekking can continue with ease of operation and Interim Protected Zone could resemble as it is.

‘As the Acting CEO for Kokoda Track Authority, I reaffirm the closure of the full track until the issue at Nauro I is resolved with the partners and everyone concerned and will advise of the reopening of the track accordingly.

‘Kokoda Track Authority has done everything it can at this point and time in its capacity to assist in resolving the matter. This includes arranging of the meeting at 10am between the landowners, CEPA and KTA with the objective of keeping the track open while negotiation with the government continues. Regrettably the Landowner Representative decided to keep the track closed until the government addresses the issue.

‘In the meantime, there will be no trekking taking place on Kokoda Track and all Tour Operators are advised of the decision made as a result of the untimely blockade.’

We immediately contacted the CEO of the Tourism Promotion Authority:

‘We have just received this notice from the Acting CEO Julius Wargarai announcing the closure of the Kokoda Trail without warning.

‘We have a trek group scheduled to reach Nauro village tomorrow – they have been advised they will not be allowed to pass through so it is likely they miss their scheduled flights. We cannot assist them to arrange new flights because we do not know when the Trail will be open.

‘We cannot expect them to trek back to Menari because we have not budgeted for a charter aircraft – so they will be stuck in the village.

‘We have another group scheduled to fly to PNG next Tuesday – they have all been paid in full, guides and porters and porters have been arranged, food has been purchased, they have all had their leave approved from work, and have been in training for around a year.

‘Meanwhile the Kokoda Initiative-, CEPA, and the KTA have been sitting on their backsides looking at their computer screens!

‘This should be a major concern for TPA because it sends out a message that PNG is an unreliable destination for potential clients and a high-risk investor destination for tour companies.

‘It will also sound a warning bell to the NRL regarding their commitment to support a PNG team in the national competition – I’m aware that many already have serious doubts about its viability .

‘We have been trying to warn of the villagers frustrations at being ignored by the Kokoda Initiative-CEPA-KTA Alliance every year for the past 15 years – rather than listen to us they tried to shut us down instead and put us out of business!

‘I feel nothing but despair for them. I feel nothing but contempt for the faceless environment officials sitting on their backsides and hiding behind computer screens in Port Moresby. And I feel a great sense of sadness for the villagers along the Trail who I have befriended over the years and who are being denied their fair share of benefits and opportunities from Kokoda tourism because nobody in authority cares about them.

‘Surely it is not too much to ask that you, your counterpart in CEPA, and Julius Wargirai arrange for a helicopter to fly into Nauro in the morning – it only takes about 10-15 minutes to get their - this would indicate that the Government is willing to listen to their grievances and will arrange for a delegation to return for more talks in two weeks time to resolve the issues.

‘Doing nothing is not an option at this critical time if you and your counterparts are serious about Kokoda tourism

‘I would therefore appreciate your urgent advice on what I should tell our trek leader currently on the Trail – and the people who are ready to leave for their trek in a few days time.

We did not receive a response.

18 September 2024: Police Commissioner declares Kokoda Blockade ‘illegal’

Police Commissioner, David Manning, issued a media release the following day which advised::

“This is an illegal protest and there are better ways to air grievances than to prevent our mainly foreign travellers from completing this historic journey.’

As a result of the media release, which was reported in the Post Courier, we expected it would be cleared however no action was taken in this regard despite the fact that police reportedly took a helicopter to visit the blockade site.

No further information was forthcoming.

In an attempt to inform PNG government officials who have never exhibited any understanding of pilgrimage tourism across the Kokoda Trail I posted a blog regarding a [‘Proposed Resolution to the Illegal Blockade on the Kokoda Trail’](#).

An extract from government social mapping studies regarding the verification of Nauro landowners. Is attached below.

19 September 2024: Email to CEO TPA & KTA

On 19 September the following email was sent to both the CEO of TPA and the Acting CEO of the KTA:

‘This morning we have had to arrange for the evacuation of our trekkers by helicopter from Agulogo which will result in a significant financial loss for our company on this trek.

‘According to this report in the [Post Courier](#) Police Commissioner David Manning has advised the blockade is illegal.

‘I would therefore appreciate your advice as to whether Commission Manning will order police to dismantle the blockade now that he ruled it is illegal.

‘According to this report [the Australian High Commission](#) is advising that the travel warning is still in place and *‘people planning on trekking ‘should check with their trekking company for the latest information. Operator’*.

‘Our phones are currently running hot with queries from trekkers due to arrive next week – two are due to fly out from the UK. They have taken leave from their work, have paid for their treks in full, and have tickets with Air Niugini.

‘We have not been provided with any information from either KTA or TPA so we are not in a position to provide advice at this stage.

‘If treks have to be cancelled for the peak September-October trekking period more than 1,000 guides and porters will lose their jobs and campsite owners will lose up to K80,000 in from the fees they would otherwise have collected.

‘I would therefore appreciate your urgent advice today as to whether the Trail will be reopened as a result of Commissioner Manning’s declaration that it is an illegal blockade ,or whether it will remain in place and cause treks to be cancelled.’

We did not receive a response from either CEO.

We followed up with this email to both CEOs after the Guardian newspaper published a report on the blockade:

'This story in today's Guardian newspaper '[Kokoda Trail disrupts travel plans](#)' advises that trekkers '*on the Trail would have safe passage*' but '*walkers not yet on the trail will be told to "turn around and go back"*'.

'Why were we not informed of this? It would have saved us K16,000 for the helicopters we had to hire to extract our group from Agulogo this morning!

'The attached FB post advises that a group from Kokoda Courage flew to Popondetta yesterday, travelled to Kokoda, then trekked to Hoi where they were turned back - they now have to make arrangements to return to Popondetta, Port Moresby and Australia.

'This publicity is killing Kokoda tourism Eric.

'It's also killing Adventure Kokoda which has already paid K60,000 in advance to TropicAir for our next three treks starting next week - we have also budgeted K9450 for trek permits and purchased K10,000 for food for the groups. And we have committed to employing 80 guides and porters.

'Further to this the blockage of the Trail will cause the loss of more than 1,000 jobs for guides and porters for the peak September-October school holiday trekking period and the loss of up K80,000 in fees for campsite owners.

'I would therefore ask that you give this matter your urgent attention and advise us by close of business today as we will have to advise our trekkers of the cancellation of our next three treks.'

We did not receive a response from either CEO.

I then published this blog: '[The Kodu Goldmine-Facts, Fallacies and Fabrications](#)' to provide some perspective to the issue.

20 September 2024: Blog: 'Kokoda Tourism – the Cost of Anarchy'

I followed up with this blog: '[Kokoda Tourism: The Cost of Anarchy](#)' to advise the appropriate authorities on the short and long term costs of illegal blockades on the Kokoda Trail.

22 September 2024: Email to CEO TPA

As a result of the continuation of the blockade and the lack of any response from the relevant authorities we were contacted by clients concerned about the impact of our treks scheduled for the remainder of September and October.

We then sought advice from the CEO of the TPA:

'How do we respond to emails like these?

'We have trek leaders and trekkers who have invested a significant amount of time and money to trek with us – they now have pre-paid tickets with Air Niugini which are now useless.

'We have international trekkers from the United Kingdom and New Zealand – what do we tell them?

'We have more than 100 guides and porters from villages who were promised a job but do not now have one.

'We have campsite owners who were relying on income from trekkers camping on their sites but they will get nothing.

'We are seriously out of pocket after having to arrange helicopter evacuations last week and having invested around K100,000 for treks which were scheduled to start next week.

'Your Police Commissioner has declared the blockade is illegal – why hasn't he been requested to end it?

'The people manning the blockade do not live in Nauro – they have moved up from Port Moresby to hold Kokoda tourism hostage to their spurious demands for ransom.

'We have learned they are acting under orders from Peter Malik from Port Moresby – Malik is not a Kokoda landowner – he is from Madang.

'Malik is a known thug - he previously burnt the Ofi Creek campsite down after the owner would not surrender to his claim for ownership back in 2009 – I have attached an email trail regarding that incident and the extent by which it was mishandled by the Australian KTA CEO who had no idea of the dynamics at play because he had never trekked across it – and he would not take advice from those who did understand.

'Malik got away with his in 2009 and it appears he is back!

'His strategy has been most effective thus far because everybody seems cowed by the provocative action he is alleged to have orchestrated.

'Smartraveller has now advised people to contact tour operators regarding the situation.

'Tour operators can't provide that information because neither the KTA, TPA, the Kokoda Initiative will provide any.

'This is having a devastating impact on people's confidence in PNG as a reliable tourism destination.

'I believe PNG authorities have a moral obligation to provide some frank advice as to when this illegal blockade will be dismantled so tour operators can pass the information onto their clients who are all in limbo over the issue.

'I would therefore appreciate an urgent response to allow us to provide advice to our people who have paid in advance, and in good faith, for a trek that might or might not happen.'

We did not receive a response from the CEO.

27 September 2024: Urgent Email to CEO TPA &KTA

We then sent the following urgent email to the CEO of TPA and the Acting CEO:

'Today we have to make a call on whether to cancel three of our next treks – one is a high-profile trek for the Adelaide Crows; one has six international trekkers from the UK; and one is a youth leadership group sponsored by the RSL Clubs in NSW.

'I have attached some basic research which reveals there is no evidence to support the demands of the blockaders regarding the payouts from the cancellation of the Kodu mining licence in 2010 - no documents have been produced to verify how much was paid and how much might be owing.

'The identities of Nauro landowners have not been verified – one of the chief rabble rousers has Madang parentage.

'We do not know the outcomes of the initial compensation payout of somewhere between K6-10 million.

'We do not know if the payout benefited the Nauro landowners or whether it was it siphoned off by corrupt officials and con-men?

'There is no dispute that Nauro landowners deserve to be compensated for the loss of potential earnings from the closure of the mine which was caused by the intervention of the Australian

government in 2010.

'We now know they were victims of a standoff between an arrogant mining company and an ignorant Canberra Government.

'Their loss has been compounded by the failure of the Canberra funded 'Kokoda Initiative' to deliver any benefits from their World Heritage folly and their mismanagement of pilgrimage tourism opportunities.

'In hindsight, Frontier Resources should have been allowed to proceed with the mining of the \$4 billion (K10 billion) gold and copper deposit from Mt Bini with appropriate environmental protection. 'The mine, adjacent to the southern section of the Trail, would have delivered an estimated \$100 million (K234 million) in community benefits over its projected 10-year life which would have expired in 2019.

'With proper management this would have funded a Military Heritage Master Plan and interpretive memorials at every site across the Kokoda Trail along with schools and health centres to meet the immediate and future needs of village communities.

'The economic future of traditional landowner communities based on pilgrimage tourism would have been assured.

'Government officials can no longer bury their heads in the sand over the need to compensate all landowner communities across the Trail for their economic loss from the closure of the Kodu goldmine and for the loss of earnings from Kokoda tourism as a result of their mismanagement which has seen trekker numbers fall by 46% since Canberra took control of the Trail under a Joint Agreement signed in 2008.

'It's now time for you to step up to the plate; instruct Police Commissioner Manning to order an immediate end to the blockade; and provide an assurance to the Kodu landowners that whatever agreement was approved by NEC in 2010 will be honoured.

'It's also time for NEC to approve the transfer of responsibility for the management of the Kokoda Trail to be transferred to TPA so it can be managed as a tourism enterprise for their future economic benefit.

'I would appreciate your urgent response by the end of the day so tour operators can salvage what is left of the peak September-October school holiday period and villages economies can get some residual benefit in the form of jobs, campsite fees, and local purchases.'

We did not receive a response from either CEO.

As a result we had to cancel our scheduled treks for the peak trekking period in 2024 - this represented a loss of 16 percent of our turnover for the year.

2 October 2010: Email to CEO TPA re losses incurred from illegal blockade

On 2 October I advised the TPA CEO of the extent of losses suffered as a direct result of the illegal blockade for our company and for PNG tourism:

'I have attached a spreadsheet which shows the extent of the financial losses we have incurred because of the illegal blockade by Nauro landowners during the peak September-October trekking period.

'The losses amount to 16% of our business for 2024 which computes to a fall of K396,000 in our gross income for the year.

'It also means:

- Air Niugini has lost an estimated K200,000 in international air fares from our Adventure Kokoda clients – and a total of K1.3 million from other tour operators based on 2023 trekker numbers for September-October;
- Port Moresby hotels have lost 1200 room nights for the same period.
- Your subsistence villagers have lost 162 jobs from Adventure Kokoda – and a total of 1200 jobs from all tour operators for the period - this equates to a loss of earnings of K116,000 for our Adventure Kokoda guides and porters and a total estimated loss of K864,000 from all tour operators.
- Landowners across the Trail have lost an estimated K250,000 in campsite fees and village purchases.

‘The angst and hostility we are receiving from disgruntled clients indicates PNG will be regarded more and more as an unreliable destination for international tourists.

‘All because a dissident group of Port Moresby based landowners decided to hold tour operators, trekkers, and your subsistence villagers to ransom in their bid to extort money, which may or may not be owed to them, from impotent Government authorities.’

The TPA CEO did not respond.

7 October 2024: Blog: ‘Proposed Resolution to Illegal Kokoda Blockade’

I published this blog: [‘Proposed Resolution to the Illegal Kokoda Blockade on the Kokoda Trail’](#) with recommendations for the future management of PNGs most popular tourism destination for the economic benefit of traditional landowner communities across the Kokoda Trail.

9 October 2024: Response from Mr. Chillion Biloi, Kokoda Resource Owner

Mr. Chillion Biloi, a Port Moresby based ‘Kodu Resource Owner’ who describes himself as a ‘Self Employed Entrepreneur’ responded to our proposed resolution for the blockade:

‘Kokoda track is closed. Until government pay k40 million socio economic development grant to land owners. Government must honors comments made with Kodu people of Naoro village. Charlie Lynn How do you know it's illegal closure of kokoda track. We are rightful customary land owners. We own 30km part of kokoda track. You are one of those who petition to stop the mining, what have done for local people along the kokoda track. You are illegal operating your business on kokoda track, I am letting you know, you will compensate the village people for your word before your company trek 30 km part of kokoda track . You must stop continue making comments on this issue.’

I posted the following response to Mr. Biloi’s post:

‘The following facts are relevant:

1. Police Commissioner David Manning declared the blockade at Nauro to be illegal.
2. The relevant NEC Minute approving the amount of compensation should be used as the authority for the payment - if there are any funds outstanding they should be paid by Government.
3. Social mapping studies authorised by the Kokoda Initiative have indicated it is not possible to positively identify customary Koiari landowners across the Trail due to inter-clan marriages and the drift to Port Moresby over recent decades. This is a PNG issue to be sorted.
4. Adventure Kokoda Pty Ltd is a registered Foreign Enterprise while Adventure Kokoda PNG is a registered company with the Investment Promotion Authority. IPA records show that the company fully complies with the provisions of their Act.
5. Adventure Kokoda has established two charities and has raised more than K2 million to provide support to Koiari and Orokaiva village communities across the Trail.
6. Before Adventure Kokoda began its operation on the Kokoda Trail in 1992 village communities earned zero income from trekking - now approximately K50 million is earned by these village communities each year in the form of jobs, campsite fees, and local payments and purchases.
7. Adventure Kokoda is the leading advocate for the Kokoda Trail to be managed as a pilgrimage tourism enterprise for economic benefit of village communities who own the land sacred to our shared military heritage.

8. The current blockade has robbed villagers at Menari, Efogi, Kagi, Naduri, Alola, Kovello and Kokoda of the opportunity to earn K2.5 million in wages, campsite fees and local purchases.
9. The blockade is seriously damaging PNGs international reputation as a reliable tourism destination.'

10 October 2024: Report on outcome of meeting between Minister and landowners

The National newspaper reported: [K50,000 'bel kol' to reopen Kokoda.](#)

'The Kokoda Track is most likely to be reopened following an intital agreement reached between landowners' representatives and a Cabinet Minister for a scheuduled payment of an ourstanding K40 million commitment.

'Tourism, Arts, Culture and Border Security Minister Belden Namah reached this tentative agreement yesterday as he released K50,000 of a K100,000 "bel kol" settlement he had struck with the landowners on Monday.

Minister Namah, who has inherited the issue advised that he

'made a commitment to them . . . with the current situation, the Government will not be able to them the full K40 million in a lump sum . . . so we will give them a schedule of payments . . . they agreed to that.'

The article also reported that:

'National Executive Council decision 401 of 2014 allocated K50 million to be paid to the Mt Kodu area' but 'only K10 million of the promised K50 million was received between 2013 and 2014'.

15 October 2024: Transfer of Kokoda Trail management from Environment to Tourism

It has been informally reported that Tourism Minister Belen Namah, with the support of the Minister for Environment, Conservation and Climate Change and the Minister for Provincial and Local Level Government will sponsor a motion to have National Executive Council (NEC) transfer responsibility for the management of the Kokoda Trail from environment to tourism this week and that landowners have agreed to reopen the Trail when it is officially approved.

16 October 2024: Kokoda Track Loss expected at K17 million

On 16 November 2024 [The National Newspaper](#) reported that according to the Acting CEO of the KTA, Mr. Julius Wargari:

'The closure of the Kokoda Track will see an estimated loss of around K17 million from August to December. . .

'International trekkers who pay a trek fee of K350 provides for an income of 'about K800,000 to K112 million' for the KTA.

'That money is supposed to be going to the people in the too LLGs (Local Level Governments) but because we do not have a consistent funding from Government, we have to divide to administration and other priority projects we are carrying out now.'

This is contrary to the advice Mr. Wargari presented to the KTA International Tour Operators Forum in Brisbane almost 12 months ago on 23-24 November, 2023. He advised the forum members:

'Because the PNG Government has not allocated funds, the trekking fees revenue has had to be used by KTA for administration expenses.'

The truth is difficult to ascertain because Mr. Wargari has failed to publish an Annual Financial Report since he was appointed CEO of the KTA in an acting capacity six (6) ago in November 2018.

Mr. Wargari also acknowledged to the forum that:

'Multiple landowner disputes caused or threatened track closures during 2023.

'Landowner frustrations, misinformation and extortion for economic gain are the common blockade triggers.

'While some of the more serious blockades required government intervention, many have been managed at a local level through KTA intervention.

‘Unfortunately, the trekking industry has complicated a number of the disputes by encouraging the Depot and Kovelov blockades, inadvertently supporting the Manari and Banana Camp blockades by providing employment and ongoing use of guesthouse facilities to the individuals involved.’

He went on to advise the forum that:

‘There was no guide on how to address these (landowner) disputes which had occurred at Kovelov, Efogi and Menari’.

The ineffectiveness of this annual talkfest was anticipated on this link: [‘Call to cancel Kokoda Track Authority junket to Brisbane’](#).

Summary & Conclusion

It is evident that the foundation of this public relations disaster for Kokoda tourism has its roots in the acknowledged fact that landowner blockades were ongoing and unresolved.

It is also evident that the attendees at the PNG International Tour Operators Forum in Brisbane including DFAT, CEPA, TPA, KTA and the Governor of Oro Province were all aware of landowner threats to close the Trail due to the various grievances they had but none of them took any action to resolve them in the 12 months that has elapsed since then.

According to reports the Acting CEO of the KTA was aware of the threat to blockade the Trail at Nauro a week before it happened but he failed to placate them or to warn tour operators.

As a result Kokoda tourism has been decimated by the cancellation of treks during the busiest trekking period of the year with hundreds of jobs lost and village communities having their only source of income denied to them.

In addition to this PNG is increasingly regarded as an unreliable tourism destination and Kokoda tourism is being classified as an unsafe destination for schools.

The management dysfunction of the Kokoda Trail have been documented on this link: [‘The Kokoda Trail: Chronology of Mismanagement: 2009-2019’](#).

These facts can no longer be ignored if PNG wants Kokoda tourism to be anything more than a 3rd World operation with 3rd World facilities.

The essential steps to restore the sullied reputation of the Kokoda Trail and ever having any chance of realizing its potential as a world-class pilgrimage destination are:

1. Government use the provisions of the Lands Act to acquire the 1972 gazetted boundaries of the Kokoda Trail as a National Tourism Asset; and
2. Responsibility for the management of the Kokoda Trail to be transferred from the Minister for Provincial and Local-Level Government and the influence of the Minister for Environment, Conservation and Climate Change to the Minister for Tourism, Arts and Culture; and
3. Kokoda Tourism to be managed as a commercial enterprise for the economic benefit of traditional landowner communities.

Charlie Lynn
17 October 2024

Attachment A

Extract from Social Mapping Studies re Nauro Landowners

Reference: <https://blog.kokodatreks.com/2024/10/07/proposed-resolution-to-the-illegal-kokoda-blockade-on-the-kokoda-trail/>

Background

Australia's involvement in the management of the Kokoda Trail was triggered by a proposal to open a goldmine on an adjacent range in 2006.

Canberra's Department of Environment, Water, Heritage and the Arts (DEWHA) was the lead agency due to its responsibility for 'heritage' which included overseas areas of historical interest. They developed a 'Joint' Agreement with the PNG Government in 2008 to assist with obtaining a World Heritage listing for the Kokoda Trail.

The following year they engaged Canberra's Australian National University (ANU) to conduct a Social Mapping Study for the Kokoda Track–Brown River Catchment Region which included the Koiari villages of Nauro, Menari, Efogi, Kagi and Naduriⁱ. The report noted that a '*key task is to determine how the population of landowners is distributed among different places*'ⁱⁱ. It was an inconclusive desk study which failed to identify landowners.

The study did not refer to the success of the [Kokoda Track Foundation community engagement strategies](#) involving village based workshops from 2004-2006.

In 2010 DEWHA was reorganized into the Department of Sustainability, Environment, Water, Population and the Arts (DSEWPA) – 'Heritage' was removed from their title.

In 2013 the DFAT Kokoda Initiative commissioned Dr. John Burton and Dr Linus S. Digim'Rina from ANU to complete their Social Mapping of the Koiari villagers.

Dr. Burton posed an interesting question under the heading 'Whose agenda? vs. What content?' regarding what '*social mapping might entail, but one missing a crucial detail: who had commissioned our research project and therefore whose agenda were we running?*'

The report noted the difficulty in identifying land ownership related to Mountain Koiari settlements '*undergoing cycles of fission and fusion*' and noted that '*a social change of greater impact has been underway for the last half-century, namely mass migration out of the area.*'ⁱⁱⁱ

Nauro Villagers

The final report noted the following regarding Nauro villagers:

- 'Mountain Koiari villages, each located on or near a branch of the Brown-Nauro system, were socially isolated until the 1950s, typically marrying no further than two villages away, and with no known residents absent outside the area, with the possible exception of Seventh---Day Adventist students or lay workers at Bisiatabu, until WWII.'
- The traditional leadership position in Mountain Koiari clans is that of the *vata biage* (lit: 'land owner') or *vata kina* (lit: 'land head').
- Changes of leadership are theoretically possible if there are personal differences between brothers, but the more likely scenario if a brother disputes the authority of the *vata biage*, at least in traditional times, is that the clan would split into two local branches and one or other would break away to found a new settlement, or join a friendly clan at an existing settlement.
- Although avidly denied of its existence since Christianity arrived, sorcery is a cause of such village splits and two examples are the fission about 20 years ago of the former Bodinumu into the current villages Maraba and Daoi in Ward 15, the fission of Naori into Naori 1 and 2

in Ward 18. Sorcerers may even be commissioned, it is said, from outside of the village.

- In summary, what we learn from the early reports is that a scattered, and wisely distrustful, population inhabited the headwaters of the Brown-Nauro system.
- The Brown-Nauro catchment takes in the entirety of the Central Mountain Koiari villages, plus Nauro, which Dutton classes as a Southern Koiari village.
- At the same time as Mountain Koiari settlements are undergoing cycles of fission and fusion, a social change of greater impact has been underway for the last half-century, namely mass migration out of the area.
- The key drivers of emigration for the Mt Brown people were the lack of services and income earning opportunities in their home area. The few functioning schools meant that children were frequently sent to stay with relatives who had migrated earlier to Port Moresby. The same reasons for migration are given by Mountain Koiari informants today.

Who Speaks for Land Among the Koiari People?

In answer to who speaks for land among the Koiari people the report noted the term ‘landowner’ misrepresents the functions of the *vata biage*, which are, so far as can be discerned, managerial in nature:

- To speak on behalf of rank and file members of the lineage on land matters.
- To master the land knowledge, *vata lulele* (lit: ‘land wisdom’) on behalf of the lineage.
- To showing his own eldest son around the land and its boundaries and teach him the *vata lulele*.
- To consult the senior men in of the lineage before announcing a decision on their behalf.
- To arbitrate land disputes among members of the lineage.
- Both Pidgin--- and English---speaking Mountain Koiari informants used the more accurate gloss ‘land director’ for the position during our fieldwork.

The report posed the questions:

- ‘What happens if the *vata biage* lives in Port Moresby and makes decisions without consulting the villagers?’
 - What if the *vata biage* has a personal conflict of interest?
 - If he is made the signatory of a trust account, will he share resource rental benefits fairly?
 - What sanctions does he have to enforce his decisions?
 - If a village splits in two as a result of a conflict, and half the village go to live somewhere else, how is he able to exercise authority over the splinter group?’
- ‘To take the last of these issues just mentioned, settlement fission, many examples are known from the area. In the last few decades, as already mentioned (p. 7), both Bodinumu and Naoro have split into two halves.’

The report recommended:

- The next priority is to break down the overall catchment of the Brown--- Naoro River system into sub catchments capable of being matched against the land holdings of the local branches of clans found at each village. The geospatial unit at DEC should take the lead in this work. As much preparatory work as possible should be done in producing satellite maps, topographic overlays etc, prior to starting a round of sub catchment mapping in the field
- although the succession of the *vata biage* seems clear in principle, transitional problems are likely to occur when one becomes infirm or dies, if a village splits in two, or if, hypothetically, a city--- based candidate successor not in possession of the requisite knowledge were to try and claim the position. This leads to conclusion that reliance on *vata*

biage for consultation purposes, however, important they are locally, should be avoided.

- A round of village visits will be required to initiate community consultations over sub catchments.
- Community consultations in relation to the sub catchments should focus on the local branches of clans that are their custodians. It is not enough to say ‘we have consulted the community’ in relation to land and resources without ensuring that the people consulted correctly represent the relevant land interests.
- The composition of residents’ committees or working groups to which community consultation for sub catchments is devolved should be verified with the aid of the genealogical database currently under construction at DEC.
- At this point, it will be possible – and probably quite straightforward – to work with the residents’ committees in local branches of clans to map the boundaries of lands and waters which each local branch of a clan is the custodian of.

There is no record of these recommendations being followed up.

On 24 November 2023 the Canberra Kokoda Initiative announced:

‘Clan leaders in the Kokoda Track region have recently signed a historic agreement. The agreement provides the leaders’ consent for their lands to be made a protected area under Papua New Guinea’s national law.’

This begs the following questions:

1. What process was used to identify and validate the clan leaders who signed their ‘historic agreement’?
2. Were they Port Moresby-based or village-based landowners?
3. Were any of the signatories to the ‘historic agreement’ engaged in the illegal blockade of the Kokoda Trail on 15 September 2024?

ⁱ Kokoda Track-Brown River Catchment Region Preliminary Social Mapping Study. Hank Nelson, Chris Ballard, John Burton, Nicole Haley, Deveni Temu. ANU Canberra. 30 June 2009

ⁱⁱ Ibid:Page 62. Para 260

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://png-data.sprep.org/resource/kokoda-initiative-phase-2-social-mapping-final-report-fieldwork-koiari-rural-llg-2010-2012> Page 25