

MY KOKODA STORY



I have led 101 expeditions across the Kokoda Trail over the past 33 years.

I have lost count of the number of times I paused at various spots to marvel at the potential of the place for pilgrimage.

During this time I travelled to Canberra to brief eight of the 11 Ministers for Veterans Affairs and three of the Ministers for International Aid and the Pacific, on the need to protect our shared military heritage across the Kokoda Trail.

It was hard to detect a pulse from any of them in the sterile surrounds of their offices – apart from a few platitudes there were no outcomes from these meetings.

I have submitted numerous papers with suggestions for improving the management of the place as a pilgrimage tourism destination. These were based on the collective experience of our trek leaders who have a combined total of 160 years professional military experience and who have led more than 650 expeditions across the Trail over the past 32 years.

None were acknowledged - all have been ignored!

I later witnessed the hijack of the name 'Kokoda' by Canberra officials to give relevance to a socio-environment agenda unrelated to our shared military heritage.

The recent illegal blockade of the Kokoda Trail is a direct result of the dysfunctional management system they imposed on the PNG Kokoda Track Authority after they took control of it under the terms of a 'Joint' Understanding signed between our two environment Ministers in 2008.

This link: [Kokoda Blockade – a Catalyst for Change](#) provides a vision for the Kokoda Trail to become a world-class pilgrimage tourism destination based on our shared wartime heritage for the economic benefit of traditional landowner communities.

My Kokoda Story traces the history of Kokoda tourism from its beginning in 1992 to its shutdown in 2024.

Hon Charlie Lynn OAM OL
25 November 2024

Contents

The Beginning	4
A Hard Media Slog to Kokoda	8
First Landowner Blockade – 2 November 1992	11
Proposal for National Memorial Park	11
Channel 9 Angry Anderson Kokoda Challenge - 1996	11
Ovoru Indiki, Village Luluai, Oagi Clan, Naduri Village	12
Early Trekking Days	15
On the Trail	15
Early Landowner Frustrations	16
Olympic Torch Relay Opportunity	17
The Land Offering	18
Meeting the Grand Chief	19
Intervention by the Minister for Provincial and Local Level Government	19
The Kodu Mine	20
Nauro Villagers	23
Who Speaks for Land Among the Koiari People?	23
Canberra’s Joint Declaration – Proposed Kokoda Track Management Authority	25
Illegal Blockade: 16 September 2024	25
Kodu Goldmine Misconception	25
How was the compensation for the Kodu Mine invested?	25
Questions for organisers of the current blockade at Nauro	26
Landowner Communities	26
Landowner Distribution between villages and Port Moresby	26
Government–Landowner Demarcation	27
Back to Nauro!	27
Case Study re Influence of Absent Landowners	28
PNG Management: 2004-2008	30
Australia’s Intervention	30
Conflict between Environment and Pilgrimage Tourism	31
Sandy Hollway - Kevin Rudd’s ‘Special Envoy’ to Kokoda	32
Our Political Conundrum	33
The Annette Dean DEI Management Experiment	37
The Rod Hillman Era of Mismanagement	40
1. Hillman’s KTA Newsletter Announcements	41
2. Track Building and Maintenance	41
4. Ward Development Committee Funding	42
5. KTA Works Advisory Committee	43
6. Capacity Building Program	43

7. Kokoda Alliance – Philanthropy	43
8. Tour Operators Licensing	43
9. Introduction of the Kokoda Track Commercial Operators License	44
10. Notice Boards	44
11. Livelihoods Pilot Project Update	44
12. Safety Package Update	46
13. Enforcing License Conditions	47
14. Kokoda Track Guesthouse Certification and Trekker Toilet Guidelines	48
15. Bridge Design: Efogi, Templetons 1 and Eora Creek	49
16. Massage Rooms	49
17. Drying Rooms	50
18. Timber Mill Training	50
Summary of the Annette Dean – Rod Hillman Era	53
The Mark Nizette Era of Influence	53
World Heritage Listing	55
Decline in Trekker Numbers	55
Increase in Illegal Trek Operators	55
Revocation of Adventure Kokoda Tour Operators License	55
Summary	56
Conclusion	57
Recommendations	58
Attachment A: Freedom of Information Request	1

The Beginning

The Kokoda Trail lay dormant for 50 years from the time of the Kokoda campaign in 1942.

As the 50th anniversary of the campaign approached in 1991 I was invited by two Papua New Guineans, David and Bernard Choulai, to organize a race across it. The intermediaries they used were aware of the fact that I was a former army major, an ultramarathon runner, the organizer of both the Anzac Day Marathon in Sydney and the annual Westfield Sydney to Melbourne Ultramarathon (1984-91). I was also a NSW Ultramarathon record holder in 1987.

The opportunity appealed as I was the son of an infantry veteran who has served in Milne Bay, Lae, and Fincafen in 1943. I was born in 1945 and the stories of the war in New Guinea helped shaped my character during my formative years.

I was also influenced by my own military service which included two years in Singapore where I visited Changi prison and Kranji War Memorial many times. I later visited every Civil and Revolutionary battlefield in the United States during my two years as an exchange officer with the US Army. I was obviously impressed with the way the British and American Governments honoured their military heritage.

I expected a similar reverence to the Kokoda Trail when I began my initial research, however it was not to be. There were no topographical maps, virtually no information on the physical Trail itself, and limited information on the campaign.

My Initial Reconnaissance Report – March 1991

We then resolved that the only way to find out about it was to trek across it. At this stage I had no idea what I was in for:

‘Arriving at the old Jackson’s airport in those days was a bit of a shock. I was met by Bernard Choulai who drove me to his haus in Badili near the Koki markets in Port Moresby. Every haus along the way was surrounded by razor wire and there seemed to be an armed guard at every entrance. Potholed roads and decrepit buildings were stained red with blobs of betel nut spit. The streets were littered with rubbish which was disposed of by the lighting of small fires every few hundred metres.

‘This forbidding first impression was quickly subdued by the warm reception I received from my hosts and their friends. I quickly felt at ease in the place.

‘Bernard introduced me to the guide who would lead me across the trail. His name was Alex Rama, a Mountain Koiari from Naduri village on the trail. I couldn’t get much out of Alex – his English was poor and my Pidgin was non-existent so I felt we were in for some interesting days ahead.

‘A lack of information and maps meant I had to overcompensate with rations and gear. All Alex I could get from Alex when I asked him how long it would take us to get to Kokoda was ‘maybe a week – maybe longer! I assumed he was going to see how I coped in the wet with my old army A-frame backpack that weighed in at 35 kg before he would give me a more accurate estimate.

‘The next five days were the wettest and toughest I can remember. The trail itself was not marked or even visible in many areas. Alex often stopped to scan the area before committing to where we should go. I later read where a British trekker got lost in the area between Imita and Ioribaiwa ridges which extends for five kilometres and crosses Emoo and Matama creeks 22 times. He was lucky to be found and very lucky to survive.

‘We pushed on till dark each day then rigged up my old army hutchie to sleep under. The constant rain had increased the weight of my pack and caused my skin to chafe. The hills never seemed to end. After a couple of days I stopped asking Alex how far to go wherever we were going because the answer was always the same – ‘about 25 minutes’ he would say without changing his facial expression or giving any further hints.

'We had our first disagreement on direction at Efogi. My sketch map indicated that we should continue directly north to Kagi village but Alex became animated for the first time and indicated we should take another trek to the North-East. There were no villages in that direction on my sketch map but it was apparent that was his preferred route so I slung my backpack across some very sore shoulders and followed him.

'Hours later we entered a misty village perched on a mountain spur towards the top of Tovovo Ridge. Alex was obviously well known to the villagers and he soon disappeared with a number of them. All I could do was pull out my ration pack and hexamine stove to make a brew. I soon noticed that villagers were sitting in a semi-circle about 30 meters away – it was apparent they were carefully observing what I was doing as they sat in silence and stared.

'Whenever I looked down at my stove to check my brew I noticed very young children tip-toeing towards me to have a closer look. Whenever I looked up they would giggle and rush back to the safety of the elders in the semi-circle. This became a ritual until Alex appeared about half-an-hour later. He told me this was his village which was called Naduri and he had gone to see his parents.

'Later in the afternoon when a villager with a machete and shoulder satchel approached me and introduced himself as 'Mark'. He asked that I follow him. I asked him where we were going. 'Myola' he said. How long will it take? I asked. 'About an hour' was his response before turning and heading off up the mountain in the mist.

'About three hours later the jungle cleared to reveal an expansive grass covered plain. It was a remarkable contrast to the jungle that had enveloped us since we left Owers Corner. I later learned that the two dry lakebeds locals call 'big Myola' and 'little Myola' were extinct volcanic plateaus. I also learned they are anything but dry – swampy and marshy would be more appropriate terms.

'The lake beds are such a contrast to the surrounding jungle which extends as far as the eye can see – and beyond – that local Koiari tribes regarded it as 'tabu' land before the war. As I gazed across the area I felt a distant familiarity with the area but was too tired and physically sore to think too deeply about it.

'Alex had lingered in his village for awhile and caught up with me at the edge of the lake. Mark was not to be seen but the smoke coming from the hut in the distance indicated that he had already arrived at his 'guesthaus'. We joined him over an hour later after trudging through the swamp.

'I settled into my hut which had a fire on top of soil to stop it burning through the floor. The soil was surrounded by small rocks to keep it in place – crude but effective and very welcoming. We were at 2200 m AMSL and temperatures can drop to near zero in the area. We rigged up a line to dry our clothes but the most painful part of the operation was lifting by arms to hang them due to the soreness in my shoulders.

'Next morning Mark surprised us with some fresh bread he had baked – my first piece of toast since we started. It was the beginning of a long relationship with Mark and his 'guesthaus'.

'After breakfast Mark presented me with Visitor's Book to sign. As I perused it I noted that previous guests had commented on a plane they had visited. I asked Mark where it was and he explained that 'long time ago Mixmaster came from Jesus and took it away'.

'This helped explain my distant familiarity with the area.

'In 1979 I had returned from a two-year posting with the US Army Parachute Rigging School in Fort Lee, Virginia. On my return I was promoted to Major and posted to the RAAF Base at Richmond. One of our specialities was rigging underslung loads for helicopters. We received an order to fly to Papua New Guinea to recover a Talair aircraft that had crashed in the highlands. We had a chinook helicopter and about half-a-dozen riggers. After recovering the aircraft to Goroka we were tasked to lift an old warplane and area East of Goroka and recover it to Port Moresby for restoration.

'I recall the chinook shutting down its engines and we alighted in what we all felt was an eerie scene – remote, isolated and quiet. We had landed beside an old Ford Trimotor which had crashed in the area during the Kokoda campaign, recovered it to Port Moresby then returned to Australia. Mission accomplished.

‘On my return to Australia after the trek I checked my army records and the place we lifted it from 12 years earlier was Lake Myola.

‘Alex and I resumed our trek back across the lakebed. The terrain merged into a spectacular moss forest and the walking was not as difficult for the next couple of days.

‘Our next obstacle was Eora Creek. The rain had not let up so it was thundering whitewater. The log bridge had been swept away and our only chance of getting across was with the rope we had with us. Alex gestured that he would try and find a crossing point downstream. He then disappeared for a couple of hours. All I could do was make another cup of tea and rest.

‘Alex eventually emerged from the bush and led me through a path he had cut. We reached the edge of the water then took it in turns to cut a tree to drop it on a group of large boulders about a third of the way across. We then shimmered backwards down the trek and took a break. Alex then secured a rope to the boulders and entered the raging creek which was about waist deep.

‘I was amazed at his strength and his poise as he edged his way to the next group of boulders unfurling the rope as he progressed. He then held the rope which allowed me to edge across and grab his outstretched hand as he hauled me out.

‘Alex then went back to recover the rope and do it all again.

‘We took a long break as we examined the next obstacle which was a 2 meter gap to a boulder on the edge of the other side. Alex eventually removed his boots and stood rocking back and forth before launching himself into the air and landing on the rock – it was as if his feet had suction cups underneath them. He look back at me with a huge grin – the first sign of emotion he had displayed since we started.

‘I threw the rope across to him to secure on the other side then had to drop into the water-gap which was shoulder deep. The pressure of the water against my backpack was incredibly powerful. I looked up at Alex – I could see the concern on his face but my focus was on my inch-by-inch progress until I could reach Alex’s outstretched hand. It was the second time he grinned that day.

‘We continued our trek up to Alola village where we were warmly welcomed once again. I later learned that Alex was telling the villagers that I would be bringing many trekkers across later on.

‘A day out of Kokoda and I was in a lot of pain. My skin was pulpy from the constant wet – my shoulders had welts in them from the backpack and my toes were stuck together. I didn’t have much left in the tank.

‘During the final few hours I started to fantasise about a hot bath in Kokoda – I had been told it was the biggest village across the trail and was the catchment area for a couple of thousand Orokaiva. I assume it had at least one hotel. My vision of a big steak and hot bath were soon shattered – the only luxury was an old building with a septic tank and a wash basin on the Kokoda Plateau.

‘I was met on arrival by Patrick Lindsay who arranged for an interview about the feasibility of conducting an Epic Run across the Trail before I had time to take my boots off . . .’



[Interview with Patrick Lindsay at end of first epic trek across Kokoda in 1991](#)

Unfortunately we were unable to attract sponsors for the event as Kokoda was not on Australia's radar at the time. Some of young corporate marketing executives we presented to thought we were talking about 'Kakadu'.

The law-and-order situation in Port Moresby at the time was also a factor.

Public commentary in the early 90s referred to the Melanesian 'arc of instability' to our immediate north and the prospect of PNG becoming a 'failed state'. The city itself was hidden behind razor-wire and a night curfew was in place. Convoys of security personnel with guard-dogs arrived in the city late in the afternoon and before nightfall there didn't seem to be an entrance that was not guarded.

Interest in Kokoda was eventually aroused with the announcement that Paul Keating would become the first Prime Minister since the war to attend an Anzac Dawn Service at Bomana War Cemetery and lay a wreath on the Kokoda plateau.

There was a flurry of excitement within PNG tourism who hosted numerous meetings in the lead-up to the anniversary. They were expecting a large influx of visitors and wanted to make the most of it. As it turned out the numbers never eventuated, which was a blessing because there were no outcomes from any of the meetings – a omen of things to come in the land of talkfests!

By this stage I had concluded that the only effective way to understand the Kokoda Trail was to have people trek across it.

With this in mind I sent out 1500 corporate invitations to join a commemorative trek for the 50th anniversary of the campaign. I received one corporate acceptance which led to the following article in the Sydney Morning Herald:

Corporate captains shun Kokoda Trail

By MALCOLM BROWN

"Thank you for inviting us to participate, but unfortunately we are unable to send a representative," was a fairly common response to Major Charlie Lynn's invitation to corporate Australia to participate in the Kokoda Remembrance Trek, the 50th anniversary walk along the Kokoda Trail.

One company sent a form letter, stating: "Dear Sir/Madam, I am in receipt of your letter requesting a donation. I very much regret that only very limited funds have been allocated for such requests."

Major Lynn, retired Regular Army officer and event director for Kokoda Epic Pty Ltd, and a driving force behind moves to commemorate this decisive battle of World War II, was "a bit disappointed".

He had sent out 1,500 letters to corporations throughout Australia and

gone to 88 Australian cities asking each organisation to send a representative.

The plan was that the corporations should fund their representatives to go on the expedition, which would leave Australia on April 15, start on the trail on April 17, and finish at the Bomano war cemetery outside Port Moresby on April 24, the eve of Anzac Day.

It would be a physical challenge, Mr

Lynn agreed, and certainly different from the air-conditioned environment of corporate executives, but a sure-fire way of getting the message across as to what was achieved in the darkest days of World War II.

The result? About 100 letters declining the invitation, or writing it off as another appeal for money. There was just one corporate representative prepared to go.

That was Mr Ian Webster, chief executive of Universal Press Pty Ltd, which owns UBD.

There was one other positive response, from Mrs Jessica Denehey, of Melbourne, but she was the sister of a corporate managing director. She wanted to go because her father had fought on the Kokoda Trail. So she was not representing corporate Australia.

And not one positive response from civic Australia.

Mr Webster, 39, said yesterday that he was in training for the trek, jogging daily, but "staggered" to discover that he was the only corporate representative going.

"I am going because it is high time we got out of this recession mode and got a bit of adventure back into life.

"It will give a few physical challenges one is not confronted with in normal life.

"It will give a chance for a bit of reflection on the Anzacs and the sacrifices people made in the war."

Mr Webster's father was a soldier serving in air supply in New Guinea, part of whose job was to resupply troops on the Kokoda Trail.

Major Lynn attributed the poor response to apathy and a lack of knowledge of the importance of Kokoda. A group of about 10 will do the 100-kilometre trek.

As a result of the article I received a further 17 individual enquiries and the Bulletin with Newsweek magazine decided to sponsor a reporter and photographer to accompany us.

It was such a profound experience the magazine published it as a cover story, '[Kokoda-A Walk on the Wild Side](#)', with a five-page article.

Paul Keating's unexpected gesture of dropping to his knees and kissing the ground at Kokoda was featured on every news outlet.



Prime Minister Paul Keating kissing the Kokoda monument. 26 April 1992. PETER MORRIS

The Bulletin article, along with Keating's actions and patriotic speeches, led to a national awakening of the significance of the Kokoda campaign when the fate of our nation was in the balance.

It also awakened my mind to a conscious desire for Australians to know more about the campaign.

I then submitted a paper to both the Australian and PNG Governments calling on them to recognise the benefit of developing Kokoda as a pilgrimage destination:

'In the short term PNG should focus its tourist development on its natural assets – the country and its people. And it should develop policies to cater for the niche adventure market.'

'The Kokoda Trail is an ideal model. The trail has a special aura because of its significance in the war. The rugged beauty of the Owen Stanley Range and the nature and disposition of the villagers along the trail are unique attractions to the adventure tourist.'

'Tourism along the trail will create social and economic benefits for the villagers. Local guides will be employed, food will be procured, accommodation will be used, and artefacts will be purchased.'

'The 50th anniversary of the campaign across the Owen Stanley Range is a unique opportunity to refocus international attention to the challenge, the rigours, and the people of the Kokoda Trail. It provides an opportunity for the government of PNG to establish a model for adventure tourism which would otherwise take many years to establish'.

Submission in 1994

A Hard Media Slog to Kokoda

After the success of our Anzac trek I invited a journalists from our major newspapers to join me on a trek to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the raising of the Australian flag on the Kokoda plateau on the 3rd November 1942.

The pilgrimage included an unexpected participant, Corporal Les Cook, a Kokoda veteran who had fought with the 2/14th Battalion during the crucial stages of the campaign – he celebrated his 100th birthday on 10 January 2023 – however, according to army records he is 103 years old because he put his age up by three years so that he could enlist.

As it transpired the journalists were mentally, physically, and emotionally unprepared for the trek which was captured by Marian Frith in her article 'A Hard Slog to Kokoda' published in the Canberra Times on 15 November 1992:

'WE ARE indeed a strange collection of life's assorted gathered here so far from home,' wrote Canberra Times journalist, Marion Frith.

'Checking our packs, checking out each other. Among us are the media's most unfit, a professional fisherman, a surgeon-cum-ardent bushwalker, a marathon runner and a 70-year-old war veteran. We are on a pilgrimage for which, it turns out, we are largely unprepared.'

'Our reasons for being there are many: some of us have been lured by the historical significance on this the 50th anniversary of the Kokoda campaign, others by the challenge of a "walk" (ha!) regarded as one of the most difficult in the world, and I and one other are retracing the awful steps taken by our



fathers before we were born. Les Cook, of Garran, a veteran of the bitter battle, is there because, he says, he could not pass up the chance to come back and see it one more time.

‘We have been herded together by an extraordinary man, Charlie Lynn, a retired Army major, who runs a company called Kokoda Epic. He is a passionate blend of adventurer and zealous patriot with an encyclopaedic knowledge of the Papua-New Guinea campaigns and an unswerving commitment to enshrining Kokoda and all it represents in the minds and hearts of ignorant Australians. . .

‘Between Charlie and Les the horrendous jungle track and the war which raged so viciously across it come to life. Charlie’s moving accounts are coloured with Les’s lively recollections. “This is where the Australians were butchered in their pits,” Charlie will say. “My mate lost his last tin of rations down that hill,” Les says. And together they guide us for a week through a moment in history that shaped a generation and cost it its innocence. . .

‘The pack of us that has fallen to the back of the group are slow and suffering. We stop constantly, cramping and aching. When will it end? By late afternoon it is raining steadily and we have not even made the ascent: there is a long way to go. Night begins to fall, as do my tears.

‘Charlie steadies me with a cuddly and some food. “Come on mate,” he says. “You can do it.” But I don’t want to do it and I don’t want to be there. I want to go home.

Still we creep on. We are blanketed in darkness and lonely torches compete with armies of fireflies beneath a thick jungle canopy that censors any hope of starlight.

‘The “up” eventually becomes an equally horrendous down and we put nervous muddy boot after nervous boot, conscious that every step has the potential for injury. Where does our energy – pathetic and all but spent – continue to come from? How is that we are able to move at all?

‘Still, the camaraderie that descends upon this miserable caravan of lost souls is warm and enveloping. Those with torches light the way for those without, those temporarily firm on their feet support those who continually fall, those still able to muster a meagre dose of fleeting good cheer share it round in exchange for a last morsel of chocolate.

‘Finally, almost 16 hours after we set off that morning, we reach the village that is camp for the night. Charlie shepherds us in, he is tense and concerned. He had not reckoned on us being this bad. I collapse beside the fire, sobbing and shaking. My body is in spasm and I hear the nurse in the group mutter something about shock.

‘Suddenly tender hands that just 24 hours ago belonged to strangers are upon me, pulling off wet clothes, finding dry ones, holding hot tea to my lips and pressing a bowl of warm mush into my hands. Someone has laid out my sleeping mat, someone else is quietening the fast swelling number of hysterical pledges to pull out. As a group we are close to being out of control. We have lost it. . .

‘INCREDIBLY I am not broken – just broken in – and I wake to find that the despair of the night before has evaporated into the mist hanging over the valley. A group of solemn-faced children have put themselves on sentry duty by our camp and a newborn baby, her head kissed with the first buds of tight black curls, lies in her shy mother’s arms. . .

‘The rest of us will see how we go, and for the first hour or so the countryside does its best to woo us as we snake through paradise-like village gardens and cross crystal rivers and rickety log bridges. The idyll is short-lived and by midmorning we are once again entrenched in the seesaw of sickening climbs followed by hairy descents.

‘Psychologically, however, something has shifted within most of us. Our whingeing has waned: we know we do not actually want to give up. If we survived the day before we can survive anything, and our bodies are spurring us on by proving they have purged themselves of the worst of the pain.

‘We never stop hurting, but few of us hurt like we did and a numbing exhaustion gradually replaces the jabbing pangs. One hundred kilometres through dense jungle? We are now really aware of just what that means, of just how hard it will be, but we are also aware that if we want to do it we probably can, it is up to us.

‘There are things we need to call on from within ourselves – grit and determination, Charlie calls it – and things we need to draw on from the group – support and friendship – in order to meet the challenge. . .

‘The next day we walk and walk, up one of the toughest rises yet, down some of the worst.

‘We try to stop quantifying. What is worse, anyway? All the climbs are mongrels and even on a good day there is nowhere I ever want to be except out of there. But something keeps us going, keeps us dragging foot after foot. Every step completed is one that never has to be retraced.

‘Up, down. Up, down. Around, across. Up, up, up.

‘That afternoon we reach our nirvana – the village of Naduri. It is the home of our guides and we arrive to a hero’s welcome. Les leads us triumphantly in and we are met by the village elders – the original war-time “fuzzy-wuzzy angels” who carried the injured Diggers out against all odds down dangerous narrow mountain tracks.

‘A feast of food and flowers is laid out for us: mandarins, sugarcane, baked and steamed taro, pumpkin tops, potatoes, spinach.

‘We fall quiet as these old men stand tall and proud. Charlie seizes the moment, the women and children are banked up around, and in a gesture that cuts across cultures and through language barriers he recites the poem that immortalised these angels. The old men beam, and our army of trekkers wipe away tears.

‘It is as if we have arrived. Somewhere, anywhere. Our guides sit with us, their families join us, and the village and its people become imprinted in our hearts. Another woman and I join the evening church service and are entranced as the pastor, his face illuminated by a hurricane lamp, recites the prayers in pidgin and the children’s voices rise in harmony so sweet we never want it to end.

‘We are silent as we get up from the rough-hewn pew. At that moment we have experienced life at its most perfect, superb in its simplicity, and suddenly we realise that the walk was worth it, if only to find this. Peace and joy are tangible, if fleeting, qualities and we know that where we are going to, where we have come from, we will probably never find it again. We want to seal the village in barbed wire and never let the world touch it. . .

‘When we finally enter sleepy, tiny Kokoda, drenched in sunshine, we are surely as triumphant as the troops who re-entered it that same morning 50 years before. We assemble at the commemorative ceremony, attended by a lowly Australian Government minion and a handful of veterans and as the Last Post sounds pitifully on a crackling portable tape recorder we are truly moved. We have done it. We understand as only those who have done it can. Our peace-time journey has tested and pushed us as we could never have imagined. The silent respect we pay to the young men who served and suffered along the path we have crossed is deep. As we clamber aboard the truck that has come to take us to the airport we have no doubt we are now invincible. We have plummeted to our worst lows and soared to our greatest heights . . .

‘There is nothing physically or emotionally we cannot endure. We had set off as 34 individuals, half of us Australians and half of us Papuan villagers. When we part we are friends – an indivisible and strong unit for whom farewells come hard.

‘If the spirit of Kokoda is strength in adversity, courage and mateship that spirit has been seeded in us all. We cross in a brief 20 minutes what has taken us eight gruelling days.

‘And like all those who crossed it before us, who left their souls in the mud and the heat and the terrifying jungle, few will ever go back.

‘Charlie, of course, is the exception. He will continue to pluck other ordinary humans from their comfortable lives and help them blossom into indefatigables, drawing on the greatness that lies largely unchallenged within us all. For the rest of us though, Kokoda will become just one humbling week in our lifetimes: albeit our whole lifetimes lived in just one unforgettably humbling week.’

Similar articles recounting the experiences of fellow journalists on the trek were published nationally in The Australian, The Daily Telegraph, and the Sunday Age newspapers.

First Landowner Blockade – 2 November 1992

On the 50th anniversary of the day the Australians re-entered Kokoda after a bloody and bitter three month campaign our media group was blocked at Kovelvo by angry landowners.

I went ahead with half-a-dozen of my guides to discuss the issue and their grievances. The discussion could best be described as hostile as many of the menfolk took it in turns to confront me at close quarters with raised voices, angry gestures, and the odd spray of betel-nut spittle onto my face. Their complaints were based on the fact that the Australian Government had built a hospital, museum, and guesthouse at Kokoda, but nobody from Kovelvo was employed so they wanted their own hospital, museum, and guesthouse!

After a tense period, the villagers settled down and we had a discussion on the benefits they could receive from trekking. We also agreed to employ a number of guides and carriers from the village on our future treks and do our best to represent their views back in Port Moresby.

Proposal for National Memorial Park

As I became more familiar with PNG, the Trail, and the reactions to trekkers I submitted a paper calling on our Federal government to proclaim the Kokoda Trail as a National Memorial Park.

Following is an extract from the paper on this link: [Proposal for a Master Plan to develop the Kokoda Trail as a National Memorial Park](#)

‘Any plan that is developed should consider the fact that PNG does not have a welfare system and the Koiari and Orokaiva people who live along the track operate a subsistence economy.

‘They are also the custodians of the land on which the battles that saved Australia were fought. If we develop our long-term plan around providing a regular source of income for them we can be assured that they will protect and honour the battlesites we restore, the educational memorials we build and the village museums we assist with.

‘The objective of the master plan should therefore be to develop a self-sustaining eco-adventure trekking industry for the Koiari and Orokaiva people who live along the Kokoda Trail.’

At this stage I was unaware that the founding fathers of PNG had gazetted the 10 metre area either side of the wartime tracks between Owers Corner and Kokoda as ‘The Kokoda Trail’ in the lead-up to independence in 1972. A more exact definition would come later as we learned more about the campaign and more advanced navigation systems were developed.

However it was difficult to progress the concept of a National Memorial Park due to Canberra’s indifference at the time.

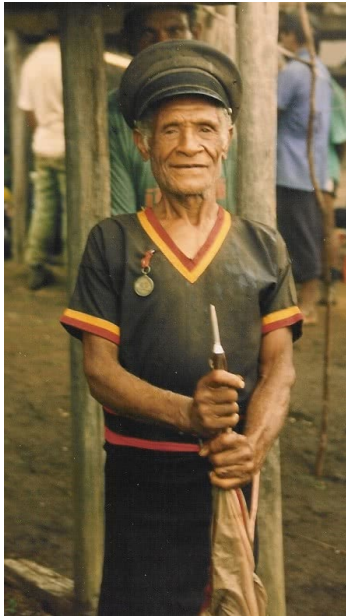
Channel 9 Angry Anderson Kokoda Challenge - 1996

In January 1996, I was invited to lead a group of television celebrities including Angry Anderson, Darryl Braithwaite, Collette Mann, Dermott Brereton and Grant Kenny across the Trail for Channel 9.

After the program featured on Anzac Day it achieved the highest ratings ever recorded by [‘A Current Affair’](#) with almost 3 million viewers - this confirmed my view that Australians want to know more about our military history.

Ovoru Indiki, Village Luluai, Oagi Clan, Naduri Village

I first met Ovoru Indiki on my initial reconnaissance across the Trail in 1991. The village was established after the war and was on the opposite range from the original Trail.



Ovoru had the quiet dignity of a leader and we became more familiar with each other on later visits. I learned he lived in Port Moresby in 1942 but returned to his village after the first Japanese bombing raids on the city. He was then indentured as a wartime carrier to support our diggers during the Kokoda campaign. After the war he was appointed as the village constable by the Australian administrators.

I then decided to tell the story of the ‘Fuzzy Wuzzy Angels’ to our trek groups. We would assemble the trekkers then Ovoru would arrive, throw a sharp salute to the group, and take his place at the head of the assembly surrounded by all the youngsters in the village.

At the end of the presentation villagers would then form up and sing for us. Marian Frith captured the moment in her Canberra Times article on her trek:

‘That afternoon we reach our nirvana – the village of Naduri. It is the home of our guides and we arrive to a hero’s welcome. Les leads us triumphantly in and we are met by the village elders – the original war-time “fuzzy-wuzzy angels” who carried the injured Diggers out against all odds down dangerous narrow mountain tracks.

‘A feast of food and flowers is laid out for us: mandarins, sugarcane, baked and steamed taro, pumpkin tops, potatoes, spinach.

‘We fall quiet as these old men stand tall and proud. Charlie seizes the moment, the women and children are banked up around, and in a gesture that cuts across cultures and through language barriers he recites the poem that immortalised these angels. The old men beam, and our army of trekkers wipe away tears.

‘It is as if we have arrived. Somewhere, anywhere. Our guides sit with us, their families join us, and the village and its people become imprinted in our hearts. Another woman and I join the evening church service and are entranced as the pastor, his face illuminated by a hurricane lamp, recites the prayers in pidgin and the children’s voices rise in harmony so sweet we never want it to end.

‘We are silent as we get up from the rough-hewn pew. At that moment we have experienced life at its most perfect, superb in its simplicity, and suddenly we realise that the walk was worth it, if only to find this. Peace and joy are tangible, if fleeting, qualities and we know that where we are going to, where we have come from, we will probably never find it again. We want to seal the village in barbed wire and never let the world touch it. . .

On 19 January 1996 I received the following letter from Ovoru:

Ovuru - Idiki
Naduri Village
Kokobla Trail
19/01/96

Dear Charlie Lin

I would like to address my
petition to you

During world war 2 I worked as a
carrier of foods, weapons and wounded
Soldier's for 3 years

After working of the world war 2 is
over, I was appointed as a Cronal
Constable since Australia rule PNG

When I became as a Cronal ~~Constable~~
I look after village people under Australia
Government rule till Independent
When Independent came I still think
back of Cronal Government and peoples of
Australia

Till you visit us and we make a good
friendship and you brought people of
Australia back.

So I present you a billum last visit
I believe you will help me in some ways to
get my world war 2 carriers payment.
Wish to receive replyment of these letter on April

Thankyou Your friend Ovuru Idiki

I was aware of the vexed issue of compensation for the New Guinea wartime carriers and whilst government to government payments were made it was evident they did not filter down to all those who were indentured due to a host of reasons including poor record keeping.

It was impossible to identify them all as there was no Honour Roll compiled and no medals were ever struck to honour their service.

I felt the increasing interest in trekking would deliver financial benefits that could be seen as a form of compensation. This was certainly the case at Naduri where trekkers are very generous in donating funds for both Ovuru and the village choir.

We were also able to sponsor Ovuru to Sydney for a very successful fundraising event in the New South Wales Parliament. During his visit he explained his father once told him 'there must be a big city in the world' and he hoped Ovuru would get to visit it. He then told us 'Now I am here'!

During our visits to Naduri it was clear that age was taking its toll on Ovuru. This was confirmed when I received this letter:

21st / 04 / 2003

To: Mr Charlie Lynn -
SYDNEY AUSTRALIA.

From Mr Ovoru Idiki.
Fuz37 Wuz37 Angel. (Kokoda Trail)

Request: Wheel Chair.

Dear Charlie Lynn.

AT THIS AGE OF MY LIVING. I SEEM THAT
ALL MY STRENGTH HAS NO POWER ANYMORE.

THEREFORE MY REQUEST TO ABOVE MENTION HAS
INDICATED TO YOU, obviously is needed.

I WOULD NOT WALK PROPERLY IN HERE SO THAT IS
my request. to you from Sydney Parliament House
and the Community here.

Thanks
and Cheers
Ovoru Idiki
NADURI Village

This was an easy request to meet and we were able to present him with a new wheelchair on our next trek.

Ovoru Idiki passed away on 9 November 2003 - I paid the following tribute to him in the New South Wales Parliament:

- [Kokoda Day Remembrance Tribute to Mr. Ovoru Idiki](#)

Early Trekking Days

While the Angry Anderson program led to a resurgence in public interest in the trekking Kokoda it created a personal financial and logistic dilemma as the Australian Government was ambivalent about the Trail, the PNG Government had more pressing social issues to deal with, and there was no inbound tourism organisation in place.

As a result, our logistics were organised from our home in Camden. All meals had to be prepacked in our kitchen. Backpacks had to be carefully prepacked and marked by the day. Our trek uniforms had to be organised and tagged.

On the morning of departure, I had to hire a trailer, pack up to 50 backpacks, drive them to the airport, get them through customs, and hope that Jill, who had never driven a vehicle with a trailer attached, would be able to negotiate the peak hour traffic back home.

The flight from Sydney to Port Moresby was often the only chance I had to catch up on some sleep after a frenetic 48 hour preparation.

The situation was reversed after my arrival in Port Moresby. I had to explain to customs why I had so much baggage, convince them I had 25 Australians following me the next day who would contribute to the PNG economy, etc. etc. Then unpack and repack most of the gear in my room at the Gateway Hotel.

On the Trail

On the Trail we are obviously aware of our duty of care to ensure the Trail is safe and campsite facilities are adequate to meet the needs of our trekkers. We are also aware of our responsibilities for the welfare of our guides, porters and trekkers in the rugged and remote area across the Owen Stanley Ranges.

This was the basis of our original proposal for a management body to be established in PNG and for trek fees to be introduced to meet these two basic requirements 21 years ago in 2003.

Our day on the Trail starts at 4.30 am when we wake to rouse our trekkers for the day ahead.

Prior to departure we brief our PNG support crew on the logistic requirements for the day, and brief our trekkers separately on the terrain, safety, villagers, and historic sites they will visit – then provide detailed historical briefings at each one. We also attend to any medical issues trekkers might have before hauling our own packs onto our backs to lead the group.

During the day we have to assess the dangers of river crossings and landslides; be alert to the possibility of emergency medical evacuations and implement our plan whenever and wherever it is required. This can cause significant delays at the evacuation point and put us under considerable physical pressure as we then have catch up with our group.

There are invariably one or more stragglers during the day. This causes us to stay behind with them which often involves late night arrivals into camp.

During peak trekking periods we have to secure our campsites by sending a PNG team ahead of the group – and often get involved in heated discussions with other trek groups who have not pre-arranged to stay at the site which does not have the capacity to accommodate them. This is because KTA staff parked in their swivel chairs behind remote computer screens in Port Moresby have not been able to work out how to implement a basic campsite booking system, or a trek itinerary management system, or a campsite development plan, or a trek itinerary management plan to meet the needs of their paying customers over the past 14 years!

By the end of our 10-day trek we will have averaged around 16 hours per day, trekked a total distance of 152 km, climbed a total of 7150 metres, and descended 7570m.

Then begins the clean-up as gear has to be accounted for; tents, sleeping bags and mats washed, dried and repaired where necessary; medical stores to be rehabilitated; funds to be acquitted; surveys to be distributed to trekkers; etc., etc.

Notwithstanding this, leading treks was the easy part of the whole operation due to the professionalism of our PNG support crews who truly are masters of their environment and who welcome the opportunity to earn some money in an economy that seemed to be well and truly busted in the mid to late 1990s.

I hung in, despite Jill's concern that we were operating in the red zone of our credit card limit, because I believed the emotional impact of the pilgrimage, the physical challenge, the authenticity of the jungle environment, and the link to traditional villagers, would appeal to more Australians as they learned more about it.

Negative media reports and 'Traveller Alerts' in Australia caused deep resentment among PNG Government officials who had their work cut-out restoring order. Our patronising attitude culminated in the frisking of PNGs much loved Grand Chief, Sir Michael Somare, by security goons at Brisbane airport. It was regarded as a national insult.

Their much loved Grand Chief had the last laugh when they asked him for identification whereupon he produced a PNGK50 note with his photo on it!

Early Landowner Frustrations

PNG was not regarded as a favourable place to do business in the 1990s due to their law and order problems which led to the imposition of nightly curfews.

As the number of trekkers began to increase so did the frustrations of traditional landowners and their village communities who were receiving few financial benefits as there were no management systems in place

Blockades became the norm as they were the only way landowners could express their frustrations.

I therefore concluded that we needed to establish a mechanism for village communities to receive a fair share of benefits from the emerging pilgrimage tourism industry.

The most effective way to make this happen would be to manage the Trail as a National Park and charge a fee for trekkers. Money received from trek fees would be used to fund a management office and generate employment by engaging villagers to maintain the Trail, ensure campsites meet the needs of trekkers, and assist in community projects.

I also believed that if traditional landowners of significant sites received a site-fee from trekkers they would protect and maintain them. During this period, I had led several mapping expeditions across the Trail and had rediscovered the original Brigade Hill and Isurava battlesites which had been bypassed and reclaimed by the jungle over the years since the war.

As the number of trekkers began to increase so did the frustrations of traditional landowners and their village communities who were receiving few financial benefits as there was no mechanism in place to identify their needs and desires.

Olympic Torch Relay Opportunity

When I learned the Olympic Torch would be carried through the Pacific enroute from Athens to Sydney for the 2000 Sydney Olympics. The plan was for each Pacific country to have the torch for an hour.

I argued that PNG should have a full day allocated to the relay because of our shared wartime relationship.

I based my belief on my past experience organizing similar professional events which included a 2,800 km relay from Cairns to Melbourne as part of Melbourne's bid to host the 1996 Olympic Games; the annual 1,000 km Sydney to Melbourne Ultramarathon; the Australian Marathon; and the fact that I had trekked across the Kokoda Trail more than 20 times over the previous nine years.

I believed it offered a unique opportunity for us all to reflect on our shared history and to honour the sacrifices made by both nations for the peace and prosperity we enjoy today.

My proposal, which I submitted to the organizers of the Sydney Olympics can be viewed on this link:

- [Proposal for the Olympic Torch to be carried across the Kokoda Trail enroute from Athens to the 2000 Sydney Olympic Games](#)

Whilst the proposal was popular in Australia we were unable to get any official support from PNG.

We eventually finished up with 2nd prize as the Sydney Olympic Committee for the Olympic Games (SOCOG) finally agreed to link it to the Kokoda Trail by having it relayed from Owers Corner to Port Moresby

The Oro Provincial Governor on the Kokoda side, The Hon Sylvanus Siembo, was not happy with the result and closed the Trail.

All officials efforts to have him lift the blockade were unsuccessful.

I then arranged to meet with the Governor in his at Parliament House in Port Moresby and found him willing to negotiate an outcome that would benefit his people. I outlined my proposal for a trek permit fee to be introduced to enable village communities to get a more equitable share of benefits from the increasing interest in Kokoda Tourism.

Olympic torch idea for Kokoda

By SALLY MACMILLAN

THE Olympic torch should be carried across the famous Kokoda Trail on its way to the Sydney Olympics, an MP says.

And those who bear it should be the descendants of the Fuzzy Wuzzy Angels who helped Australian troops during the war.

"Kokoda is sacred ground for Australia," said Liberal MLC Charlie Lynn. "The carriage of the torch through the remote battle-sites of Kokoda, Deniki, Isurava, Templeton's Crossing, Mission Ridge, Brigade Hill, Iorabaiwa Ridge and down the 'golden staircase' of Imita Ridge would be a wonderful tribute to those who sacrificed their lives for the freedom we enjoy in Australia today."

Lynn, whose leadership school treks across the track have helped its villages with medical, communication and education aid, says such a passage would be a way of saying thanks.

Papua New Guinea was Australian territory during the war years. The Kokoda Trail was the only gateway available to the Japanese for their invasion of Australia.

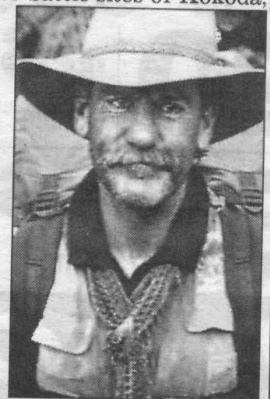
Just a handful of Diggers stood between the Japanese and their objective.

"The torch would be carried by the grandsons of the Kioari — the Fuzzy Wuzzy Angels — who live in the villages across Kokoda," Mr Lynn said.

"We have never really said 'thank you' to these wonderful people who saved so many Australian lives during the Kokoda campaign.

"They have not yet been paid nor have they even received a medal for their services.

"The honour of carry-



Leader: Charlie Lynn

ing the Olympic torch across the same notorious track that their grandfathers carried our Diggers would be a fitting tribute to the sacrifices they made.

"The torch would focus world attention on the significance of Kokoda. It is an indictment on our education system that Australian children know more about The Alamo than they do about Isurava.

"American folk heroes such as Davy Crockett, Daniel Boone and Jim Bowie are household names whilst real Australian heroes such as Bruce Kingsbury, VC, Charlie McCallum, D.C.M. and Lindsay Bear, D.C.M., M.M., are unknown."

Re-tracking Kokoda: P143

He accepted the proposal and the Trail was officially reopened at a special ceremony attended by Kelvin Templeton and myself in Kovello village after on the 23rd November 2001. I was honoured when he presented me with a traditional headband:

'This headband that I have put around your head is a symbol of a chief and is sacred. It is only worn by chiefs in the Oro Province. This headband you wear marks you as one of the chiefs of the Orokaiva people because of your hard work to my people in our endeavours to reaching a lasting solution to the famous Kokoda Trail closure. This headband and necklace that I presented to you today marks our brotherly relationship and a lasting memory to live on in future generations to come.'



I found Governor Siembo to be a likeable and interesting character and we formed a good friendship. He left school at the end of Grade 3 then went to work in Lae for 13 years before returning to his village and went into the coffee business. He was later elected as a local Government councilor for Higaturu and eventually as Governor for Oro Province.

Prior to that I was given permission to lead a group across the Trail in September after it had been closed for nine months.

The Land Offering

The morning after we arrived in Naduri village on 27 September 2001 we woke to an assembly of villagers formed up behind a group of clan leaders sitting in a semi-circle. They were dressed formally and I was invited to stand before them. The son of village elder, Mr Andy Ovoru then stood before us and read the following proclamation:

'The Land Offering.

'The land entitles/landowners of Naduri Village, Mt Koiari, North of Central Province.

'The Village Luluai/Village Constable, Village Elder and Director of Land, under Oagi Clan of Naduri village and the famous World War 2 (2) carrier known as Fuzzy Wuzzy Angel of the Kokoda Tracking Trail (Mr Ovoru Indiki, 86 year old)

'The Land Directors, Mr Ovoru & Mr Mala Batia Sai with other members of the clan having this privilege and opportunity to offering you Mr Charlie Lynn the hectare of land. Been so long generous along the track the we have enormously afforded.

'Under the Constitution of the Government of Papua New Guinea and the Local Level Government Council the land is entitled under the Oagi Clan Directores, Mr Ovoru Indiki, Mr Mala Sai Batia, Mr Joel Oreki, Mr Sibebe Manani, Mr. Sovemi Aoba, and Andy Ovoru, with among other clan members which our true Ancestors lived through after the World War 11 (2) stepped in and lots of disturbance with many damages have occurred with etc, enforcing through by the two clients which the Australians become the victories of it over the Japanese.

'The Land discussion have been made among the Oagi Clan and family itself and every Community living within and around the Nauri area, and outside Naduri village.

'The Land discussion have been made among the Oagi Clan and family itself and every Community living within and around the Nauri area, and outside Naduri village.

'The Community of Naduri village and hosting clan, Oagi Clan are happy to hand over the hectare of land to Mr. Charlie Lynn, under the witnessing of Oagi Clan members, Church Elder, Village Lawyer, Villager Elders, and the Community of Naduri Village with other Clan Members and the Clan Directors of Oagi Clan.

'We therefore give you this hectare of Land to establish and do other activities in remarkable of yourself and etc.

'The Clan members, Oagi Clan are as listed.

1. Mr Ovoru Idiki
2. Mr Mala Soi Batia
3. Mr Joel Oreki
4. Mr Sibebe Ramaui
5. Mr Soremi Aoba Baria
6. Mr Andy Ovoru.

'Hope your establishment to this area will be much appreciated in the future of your living.

'Thank you.

'28 September 2001'

This was a humbling, symbolic gesture of goodwill from a community which enjoyed their interaction with Australians and who were keen for trekking to resume after almost 12 months as it was their only source of income.

Meeting the Grand Chief

On 15 November 2002, I was invited to a private meeting with the Prime Minister of PNG, the Grand Chief, Sir Michael Somare at the Sheraton on the Park Hotel in Sydney by the PNG High Commissioner, H.E. Renagi Lohia.

I was asked if I could arrange a meeting between Sir Michael and the NSW Premier, Bob Carr. I was able to facilitate this and the following day I escorted the Grand Chief to the Premier's office and introduced them. I believe this was the start of a close relationship between them.

I received the following note from the Premier after I wrote to thank him for hosting the meeting at such short notice:

'Dear Charlie,

'I've always been impressed by your love of the Track and your determination to ensure its place in the Australian imagination is never lost.

'You know better than most that the Kokoda Track isn't just a place where our salvation was won – though we should remember and document and treasure every inch of it. Kokoda's now part of the Australian Dreaming, a sacred site.

'More than that the Men of Kokoda are among the greatest of heroes in a land that rightly canonizes few heroes. And as time slowly steals the survivors from our midst, it's hard to resist thinking that Australians in the not too distant future will look back with almost disbelief at the giants who lived in those days.'

The continued lack of any sort of management system ensured the '*law of the jungle*' prevailed while landowners became more frustrated as their interests were ignored.

Australian High Commissioners in Port Moresby, H.E. Nick Warner, and his successor, Michael Potts were aware of the situation but unable to implement any sort of management system without the consent of the PNG Government.

Intervention by the Minister for Provincial and Local Level Government

I then approached Sir Peter Barter, the PNG Minister for Provincial and Local Government Affairs and Intergovernmental Relations, to seek his support in establishing a management body. This was new ground for PNG as there was no precedent for operating such a place as a National Park. Sir Peter therefore established a 'Kokoda Track (Special Purpose) Authority' which became known as the KTA.

Unfortunately, he was not able to provide any funds to support the new body and there was no interest in the enterprise from the Australian Government.

My company, Adventure Kokoda, provided an advance of \$10,000 to engage a CEO and establish an office facility. Mr Warren Bartlett, a former Kiap who was providing our logistic support in PNG, was engaged on an annual salary of \$12,500, and provided with a part-time assistant.

A Board of Directors was duly appointed however they had no qualifications or experience in commerce, governance, pilgrimage tourism, or trekking. This would soon lead to serious challenges for the CEO who had to seek to protect the finances of the KTA from them.

A trek fee of K200 was introduced. It was bitterly opposed by some eco-tour companies which added to the initial stresses Bartlett had to deal with in his endeavours to bring a degree of order to the trekking industry.

Sir Peter later wrote:

“Without Charlie Lynn's dedication to the people of the Kokoda Trail, and Papua New Guinea in general, and his assistance in early negotiations in the establishment of the Authority, the establishment of the Kokoda Track Authority and its future plans for assisting the sustainability of the Kokoda Track Tourism Strategy and its heritage, there would be no special purposes authority - it would still be sitting in limbo.”

I remained convinced that if traditional landowners received a site-fee from trekkers they would protect and maintain them. During this period, I had led several mapping expeditions across the Trail where I rediscovered the original Brigade Hill and Isurava battlesites which had been bypassed and reclaimed by the jungle over the years since the war.

The Kodu Mine

The next major issue we were confronted with was the appearance of survey pegs on the southern slopes of the Maguli Range and the clanking of bulldozers as they prepared to open a rich gold and copper deposit near Mt Bini on the adjacent range.

We first noticed the appearance of survey pegs on the southern side of the Maguli Range and assumed the government was finally mapping the area as a result of the increasing interest in trekking across it.

We then became aware of bulldozers clearing the area for a road link on the Western side of Mt Bini adjacent to the Kokoda Trail. Soon after the pristine waters of Ofi Creek turned black due to the pollution from the mine area.

We expressed our concerns to the Government which led to the following article in the Australian newspaper:

[The Australian - PM battles to save Kokoda from goldmine](#)

Greg Roberts, September 29, 2006.

‘JOHN Howard has moved to scupper plans by an Australian company to mine gold along the Kokoda Track, where more than 600 Australian soldiers lost their lives in some of the fiercest fighting of World War II.

‘In a development likely to spark tensions between Canberra and Port Moresby, the Prime Minister is determined that the proposal by Gold Coast-based Frontier Resources is scrapped.

‘Mr Howard is prepared to tell his PNG counterpart, Michael Somare, that Australia will not accept large-scale mining on the track, where thousands of Australian trekkers make an annual pilgrimage.

'But Frontier yesterday warned against "foreign government intervention" over a gold deposit, worth an estimated \$1.3 billion at current prices, it has unearthed in the Mount Bini area, northeast of Port Moresby. The 96km Kokoda Track passes right through Frontier's 540sqkm Kodu exploration area, which is also estimated to contain almost \$400 million worth of copper.

'Kokoda Track Memorial Walkway chairman and former RSL NSW president Rusty Priest said the sanctity of the Kokoda Track should be preserved.

"Australians appreciate the sacrifices made during the Kokoda campaign and we don't want to see that area ripped up for a goldmine," Mr Priest said.

'Mr Howard dispatched a high-level delegation headed by Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet first assistant secretary Hugh Borrowman to PNG to inspect the proposed mining area this week.

'Members of the delegation, which returned to Canberra last night, included Australian War Graves director Major General Paul Stevens, the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade's Pacific division head David Binns and Department of Environment and Heritage assistant secretary Greg Terrill.

'The visit comes as Australian war veterans - to be headed by Mr Howard's factional ally in the NSW Liberal Party, MP Charlie Lynn - prepare to launch a campaign against the mine.

'Mr Lynn, a Right faction powerbroker, is the founding chairman of the Kokoda Track Foundation and owner of Adventure Kokoda, which organises trekking tours of the track.

'The Kokoda Track took a heavy toll on both Australia and Japan. More than 600 Australian soldiers' lives were lost and more than 1000 were wounded.

'By the time the last enemy bastions at the end of the overland route fell on January 22, 1943, the lives of more than 12,500 Japanese had been lost.

'Mr Lynn said yesterday that the Prime Minister had asked the delegation to explore options to protect the environmental integrity of the track.

'He said he was disturbed that an Australian company planned to mine the area. He had seen exploration tags recently pegged along the track and exploration work was clearly visible.

"We are talking about a national icon and if we as Australians allow anyone to desecrate that, we will never be forgiven," Mr Lynn said.

He said the mine risked undermining a thriving trek-based ecotourism industry.

"When trekking started in the early 1990s, all the villages along the track had a combined income of \$3000 a year," he said. "These days, one village earns that much in a month."

But Frontier manager Peter McNeil said Mr Lynn had a conflict because of his involvement in the trekking business.

Mr McNeil said he had been consulted by Mr Howard's delegation and did not believe Canberra should intervene.

"It would not be right for a foreign government to try to impose its will on Papua New Guinea," he said. He said the mine would have minimum visual impact on the track and had been welcomed by villagers, who believed the only locals who benefited from trekking were a handful who owned hostels along the track. "They see it as the main chance to get development in the area," he said. "These are people who have to walk four hours to get first aid and who have a one-room shack as a school."

'Frontier ran into trouble with the stock exchange in July after shares rose 300 per cent on the basis of a controversial resource calculation announcement.

'It had repackaged two old releases into a bullish announcement that cited billions of dollars of in-ground copper based on "hypothetical reserves".

This article was based on known facts at the time.

Our subjective relationship with Nauro villagers were based on the reality of our association with them which began when we first camped in their small village in 1992. It was a small village with its own airfield located in its original wartime location within the Nauro swamp area. Access was via a series of floating logs which posed their own challenges for trekkers.

There was a different ‘vibe’ in the village. Locals seemed to be shy and kept their distance from trekkers. There were no welcome ‘sing-sings’ which were common in other villages across the Trail. Communication was difficult due to their poor English skills. They seemed to be devout Seventh Day Adventists with a small church but no school. They lived a subsistence lifestyle.

Soon after the turn of the century in 2000 the village split and relocated to their current locations – half to a ridge on the northern section of the Maguli Range and half down in the valley between the Range and Mt. Bini. Our PNG guides informed us the divide was due to sorcery related issues within the village community.

The licence to operate the mine was then cancelled due to an intervention by the Australian Government. Our guides later told us the Government was going to pay them around PNGK6 million in compensation and they were going to move down to Moresby to buy some buses. We never sought to verify the details which were sketchy however they did vacate the village soon after.

I did wonder at the time who might have been advising the villagers, who were financially illiterate, on how to invest the windfall they were about to receive but it was not my business and we continued to focus on our trekking business.

I now believe it’s time to revisit this issue.

The illegal blockade of the Kokoda Trail on 16 September 2024 poses an interesting dilemma for the PNG Government.

- Should it allow its most popular tourism destination to be held hostage by a group of unverified Port Moresby based landowners? or
- Should it seek to reclaim ownership of it from the influence of Australian officials’ intent of managing it as an aid-funded environment park?

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 in 2008 to assist with obtaining a World Heritage listing for the Kokoda Trail and the surrounding Owen Stanley Ranges.

The following year they engaged the 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 ignored 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-Nauoro 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 ever being followed up.

On 24 November 2023 the DFAT 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?

Canberra’s Joint Declaration – Proposed Kokoda Track Management Authority

In 2015 Australia and PNG signed a Joint Declaration which included a provision to ‘*keep the track open, safe and preserved as shared heritage*’.^{iv} This had no impact on landowners who continued to close sections of the Trail every year since then as a means of expressing their grievances based on their perceived failure to receive a fair share of benefits from pilgrimage tourism.

In 2022 a Canberra proposal to establish a ‘Kokoda Track Management Authority’ responsible to the PNG Minister for Environment, Conservation and Climate Change coincided with the reorganization of DSEWPA as the Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water (DCCEEW) in Canberra.

Neither the Minister for Veterans Affairs, the Australian War Memorial, nor the PNG Minister for Tourism, Arts and Culture were invited to develop policy aimed at enhancing the value of the pilgrimage which has seen 65,000 Australians trek across it over the past two decades.

As a result trekker numbers have fallen by 41% since the Canberra assumed responsibility for the management of the Kokoda Trail in 2009.

Illegal Blockade: 16 September 2024

The Illegal blockade by a group of unverified Nauro landowners on 16 September 2024 is the culmination of a failed strategy by a succession of Canberra environment agencies in their bid to assist PNG to obtain a World Heritage listing for the Kokoda Trail and Owen Stanley Ranges in 2008.

The blockade has exposed the failure of the PNG Government to acquire the 20-metre wide, 138 km Kokoda Trail between Owers Corner and Kokoda as gazetted in 1972; its impotence in enforcing the law since the Police Commissioner declared it to be illegal; and the lack of concern for vulnerable village-based landowners who have lost their economic livelihood during the peak of the Kokoda tourism season.

Kodu Goldmine Misconception

Australia’s successful intervention to stop the proposed Kodu goldmine was based on the impact it would likely have on the gazetted Kokoda Trail between Owers Corner and Kokoda – not just the section on the adjacent range to Nauro village.

The proponents of the mine, Frontier Resources, acknowledged this fact through their offer to invest in the physical maintenance of the entire 138 km Kokoda Trail as well as education support for all villagers.

Whilst there is some uncertainty about the amount of compensation received by Nauro landowners for the withdrawal of the approval for the mine to proceed (somewhere between K6-K10 million) there is no evidence that the financial windfall was shared with their fellow landowner communities across the gazetted Kokoda Trail.

The relocation of villagers from Nauro to Port Moresby suggests they kept all the compensation for themselves.

How was the compensation for the Kodu Mine invested?

This is a crucial question because Nauro-based villagers were financially illiterate - as a result they would have been vulnerable to exploitation by more ‘savvy’ financial advisors in Port Moresby. If they were left to their own resources to invest the money as they pleased then answers to the following questions should be sought:

- What was the amount of compensation approved by National Executive Council in 2010?
- Did the Government seek to offer financial advice to the recipients of the compensation payout?
- How much compensation was paid to the Nauro Landowners?
- Was the compensation paid to an individual on behalf of the villagers; divided among the landowners in the villages of Nauro 1 and 2; or paid into a consolidated fund?
- How were the funds invested and distributed?
- If the funds were invested in a business what is the profit/loss record of that business since 2010?
- What is the current financial situation of the recipients of the compensation?

Questions for organisers of the current blockade at Nauro

The shutdown of the Kokoda Trail and the resultant denial of up to K2 million in foregone earnings for all village communities between Nauro and Kokoda begs the following questions:

- How many of those orchestrating and controlling the current blockade live in Nauro village?
- How many are verified landowners?
- How many live in Port Moresby?
- Did the organizers of the blockade advise the KTA of their intention to block the Trail at Nauro – if so what action did the KTA take to warn tour companies who had scheduled tours booked for the peak September-October trekking period?
- What plans, if any, do the organizers of the blockade have to compensate losses incurred by villagers between Nauro and Kokoda for the losses they have incurred?
- If the organizers of the blockade are successful in obtaining further compensation for the closure of the Kodu mine what are their plans for sharing it with all village communities between Owers Corner and Kokoda?

Landowner Communities

Landowner communities have a right to shared benefits in the form of employment opportunities, campsite fees, battle site fees, and value adding initiatives such as welcome ceremonies, re-enactments, local sing-sings and services to meet the needs of trekkers.

These can be identified and monitored through the conduct of annual village-based workshops and an effective Kokoda Tourism Ranger Monitoring System.

The lack of any follow-up Social Mapping studies in partnership with the University of Papua New Guinea (UPNG) and the Department of Lands is a serious dereliction of responsibility by the Canberra funded Kokoda Initiative.

Landowner Distribution between villages and Port Moresby^v

VILLAGE	RESIDENT	ABSENT	TOTAL	% RESIDENT	% ABSENT
KAGI	99	336	435	23%	77%
NADURI	131	224	375	35%	65%
EFOGI	207	787	995	21%	79%
MENARI-LONI	116	199	526	27%	73%
NAURO 1&2	168	299	467	36%	64%
TOTAL	721	1845	2798	26%	74%

Note: Figures relevant as at 2010

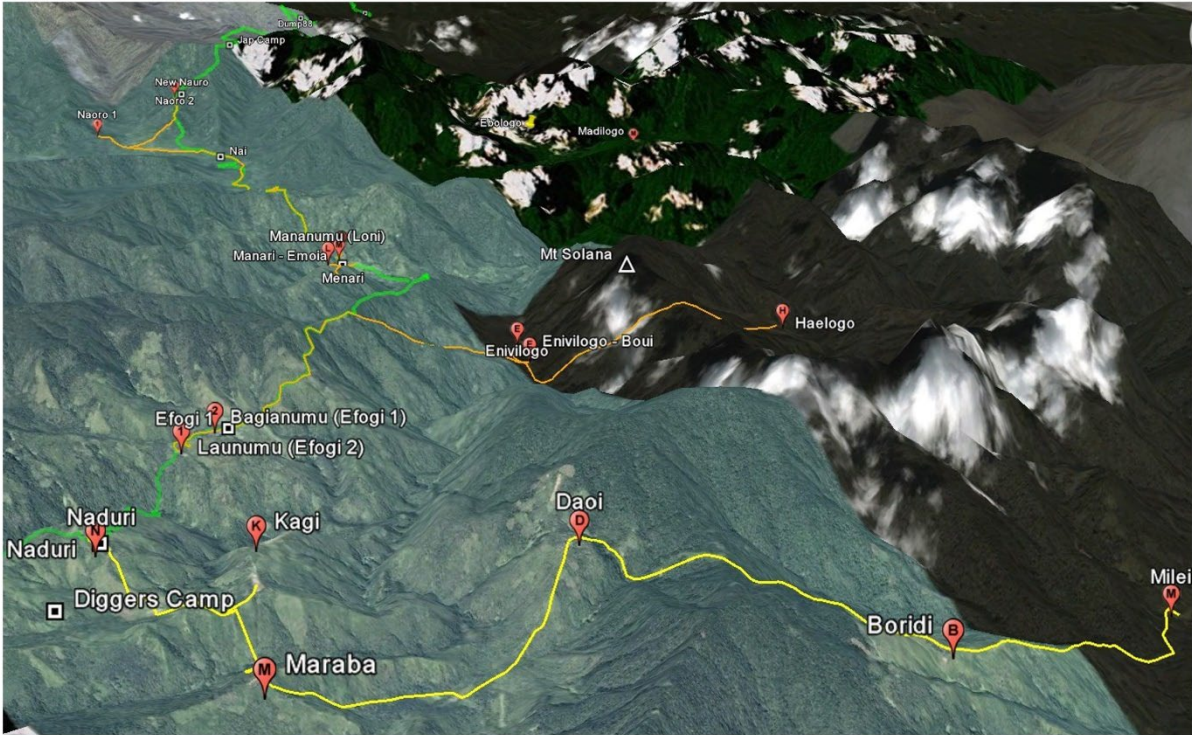


Figure 16. Routes taken on field trips displayed in Google Earth, viewed from the north---east.
 Yellow: 19 Sep---1 Oct. Orange: 10---25 Nov 2010. Green: Kokoda Track.

Government–Landowner Demarcation

The Kokoda Trail has the potential to be a high-value, world-class pilgrimage tourism destination capable of providing a sustainable economic future for traditional landowner communities.

Government therefore has a responsibility to ensure:

- The gazetted 20 metre, 138 km, Kokoda Trail is acquired as a national tourism asset for the benefit of all landowner communities between Owers Corner and Kokoda;
- the identification of landowners within the gazetted boundaries of the Trail;
- the phased development of military heritage and tourism infrastructure to enhance the value of the pilgrimage for international tourists while providing income-earning opportunities for village communities;
- assistance in the development of management systems that provide for security of investment, good governance, transparency, personal safety, annual village-based workshops^{vi} and shared benefits for landowner communities;
- a training and development system for PNG companies to provide personnel and logistics support to Australian Kokoda tour companies; and
- a system for providing educational benefits for the families of Port Moresby based landowner communities.

Back to Nauro!

There is a distinct possibility that the reported K10 million awarded to a small group of financially illiterate subsistence villagers could have been siphoned off them due to poor management advice and/or the intervention of corrupt officials and other grifters.

This could in turn have led them back to the village to have a second attempt to bluff the government into providing them with another financial windfall.

There is therefore a need to revisit the facts behind the original compensation payout to them.

The original proposal by Frontier Resources was based on shared benefits between the payments to landowners, and payments for the development of the 138 km Kokoda Trail as well as education for all communities across it via the Kokoda Track Authority. This would have amounted to \$100 million (PNGK250 million) over the 10-year life of the mine.

It is worth noting that if four companies had been included in the discussions on the impact the mine might have on pilgrimage trekking and had been advised of this offer they would have provided full support to it provided it included proper environmental safeguards. Unfortunately we were ignored by an arrogant mining company and ignorant government officials.

The following factors should therefore be considered in the Terms of Reference for a review of the illegal blockade that has closed the Trail and shut down the primary source of income for village communities:

- What level of financial compensation did the Australian Government provide to the PNG Government in return for their assistance in withdrawing approval for the original mine to proceed?
- What level of compensation was approved by the National Executive Council (NEC) for distribution to the Nauro landowners?
- Do the Nauro landowners have an official ‘landowners association or a registered company?
- If so, who are the registered directors?
- Was consideration was given to Nauro landowners sharing their compensation with other landowner communities via the Kokoda Track Authority according to the formula proposed by Frontier Resources.
- Did Nauro landowners establish a company to manage the buses they were reported to have invested in?
- What are the details of other investments they might have invested in?
- Were any loans made to individuals – if so what were the details and have these been repaid?
- If so what was the name of the company; who were the directors; and what is the current financial status of the company?
- Were there any other financial beneficiaries involved in the distribution of the compensation they received?
- If Nauro landowners are owed additional compensation as they claim, do they have any intention in sharing the benefits with other Kokoda Trail communities as per the original formula proposed by Frontier Resources?

Case Study re Influence of Absent Landowners

The insidious influence of Port Moresby based landowners was evident in the conduct of workshops and forums conducted by former [KTA CEO, Rod Hillman](#), in Port Moresby after he was appointed to the position in 2009. Hillman had no previous experience in dealing with Melanesian culture, would not take advice, and had no appreciation of the pilgrimage across the Trail as he did not trek it until the end of his tenure in 2012.

The following extracts from my diary regarding one of my many mapping expeditions to produce a [Kokoda Trail Topographical Map](#) provide a snapshot of my experiences with Port Moresby based ‘influencers’ over village-based landowners:

Efogi Labour Assistance

In 2010 I was conducting a mapping expedition to identify the wartime trail between Brigade Hill and the Kagi Gap. I assembled a team of six guides for the task but after some heavy going between wartime Efogi and wartime Kagi it was apparent we needed more support.

We returned to Efogi to engage a couple more carriers however I was told the village had received instructions not to provide any support to my mapping expedition directly from Port Moresby.

The leader of our team, Sullivan, told me to wait until he went over to his near-by village of Naduri to recruit some men from his own clan.

We had a couple of hours to fill while waiting and got into conversation with the Efogi villagers who I knew, and who were keen to talk. When I asked why they had been instructed not to help me they did not know the reason however it was clear the main perpetrator calling the shots was a KTA Board Member (who later embezzled some K250,000 from the KTA bank account with the assistance of his '*wan-toks*' within the banking system).

The Australian CEO who assumed control of the KTA in 2009 was advised of the heist which had been well documented, but chose to ignore it rather than create an 'incident'.

I asked what would happen if they did support me. They advised that when they, and/or their families, went to stay in their '*wan tok*' settlements on the outskirts of Port Moresby they would be bashed.

There are other examples of the influence of a Port Moresby based 'mafia' along the Trail such as the vexatious land-claim over Lake Myola which destroyed the income earning potential of the traditional landowners at a cost of around PNGK1 million in lost income since it was initiated – it was eventually thrown out of court, but the damage had been done and the income earning potential has since been lost.

We advised the Australian KTA CEO of the vexatious nature of the claim based on our dealings with landowners over the previous decade, but he refused to get involved because the chief proponent of the claim was a member of his KTA Board. The campsite, one of the best across the Trail at the time, is now derelict and the local community has lost a significant, sustainable source of income.

The Australian CEO never learned that appeasement is not respected in the Melanesian culture as he did not trek across the Trail until the end of his two-year tenure.

Before I led my first groups across the Trail in 1992 there was no trekking industry - villagers earned zero income!

There was no organizational structure until I convinced Sir Peter Barter to establish a management body and advanced \$10,000 (PNGK25,000) to make it happen. Our objective was to enable villagers to receive a fair share of benefits from the emerging trekking industry.

Since then 65,000 Australians have trekked across it.

This has generated around \$70 million (PNGK175 million) for village economies in the form of jobs for guides and porters, campsite fees, battle-site fees, local sing-sings and village purchases.

Before that they received nothing!

More than \$250 million (PNGK700 million) has also been generated for PNG tourism (international air travel, hotels, charter aircraft, buses).

As a result Government has received around \$25 million (PNGK70 million) in GST revenue.

Soon after Australia's intervention a Joint Understanding was signed to assist PNG to obtain a World Heritage listing for the Trail. This led to a focus on environment rather than the people impacted by the decision to stop the mine.

From this time the emphasis changed from pilgrimage tourism development to management of the the Kokoda Trail as an environment park.

PNG Management: 2004-2008

From the time the PNG Kokoda Track (Special Purpose) Authority was established in 2004 until Australia's intervention in the management of the Kokoda Trail trekker numbers increased by 255% from 1584 in 2004 to 5621 in 2008.

The rapid increase placed an intolerable strain on the CEO, Warren Bartlett, as he sought to keep an increasingly corrupt Board of Directors in check and manage an increasing number of rogue tour 'companies' who were ignoring the need to pay for trek permits. Bartlett was a respected former Patrol Officer (known as 'Kiaps') and had more than 30 years' experience in Government administration. He was well versed in the management vagaries of the '*Melanesian Way*'.

When he sensed that some rogue Australian companies were rorting his trek permit system in 2008 he quietly arranged an audit at a checkpoint half-way along the Trail. The audit revealed that rogue tour companides had failed to apply for 1600 trek permits which resulted in a serious reduction in income.

The management system on the Trail at this stage was virtually non-existent as Warren Bartlett did not have the staff or resources to meet the demands he faced from corrupt officials and rogue tour companies.

Legitimate tour companies were desperate for some order to the system however there was no sign of any urgency from the advance DEWHA team from Canberra to address this issue.

Australia's Intervention

Canberra reacted by offering assistance to PNG to stop the mine and protect the Trail from any future incursions from forestry or mining operations. They decided that the most effective strategy would be to seek a World Heritage Listing for the Trail and the surrounding Owen Stanley Ranges.

Responsibility was then allocated to their Department of Environment, Water, Heritage, and Arts (DEWHA) as it was responsible for the heritage of 'overseas places of interest to Australia'.

They then funded a 'Joint' Understanding with the PNG Government in March 2008 to take effect the following year. The Department of Veterans Affairs (DVA), which has responsibility four our WW1 icon, the Gallipoli peninsula, was sidelined in the process.

Soon after I met a small group of DEWHA officials walking across the Trail with a local PNG guide. I was surprised at the choice as PNG guides knew little about the military history of the Kokoda campaign.

We chatted for about an hour. I provided them with as much information as I could and hoped that we would meet again to continue our discussions.

As it transpired this was a precursor for more visits by officials, consultants, environmentalists, anthropologists, archaeologists and social engineers in their endeavour to assist in the development of a case for a World Heritage Listing for the area.

The invasion of the new arrivals was reminiscent of Keith Wiley's observations in 'Assignment New Guinea' 53 years earlier:

'In recent years the academics have discovered New Guinea. Grave, plump, portentous, they swarm north in their hundreds each winter, generally finishing somewhere near Goroka in the Eastern Highlands where at times they become so numerous that every bush and stone seems to conceal a lurking bureaucrat or anthropologist. After a few weeks or a few months they return home to prepare brisk solutions for all the problems which beset the land. Too often they see New Guinea coldly as an exercise in nation-building to be carried out as quickly as possible, with one eye on the taxpayer at home and the other on some ranting demagogue in the United Nations.

'At times the maligned colonialists, who walked over the country and fought for it, seem to come nearer the heart of the matter. Stripped of slogans and self-interest, New Guinea emerges not as a 'problem'; to be 'solved', or assessed, but simply as a land, wild and beautiful, worthy to be loved for its own sake; with a people, backward, kindly, and in need of help'^{vii}.

We soon learned they were just as unfamiliar with PNG and the *Melanesian Way* as their predecessors were in 1965.

There was much confusion at the time as a Kokoda Development Program was being run by AusAID through the Australian High Commission and a new DFAT funded 'Kokoda Initiative' was assigned to the PNG Conservation Environment Protection Authority (CEPA). They were merged years later but in the intervening period they operated in a parallel universe to each other and neither program was much interested in pilgrimage tourism.

Conflict between Environment and Pilgrimage Tourism

It is worth noting that a 2006 '[Rapid Assessment and Prioritisation of Protected Area Management](#)' (RAPPAM) report, compiled by the Department of Environment and Conservation, the PNG Forestry Authority, the Research and Conservation Foundation, the Nature Conservancy, and the Village Development Trust advised:

*'Many of the areas with **high socio-economic importance** are facing a relatively **low degree of threat** (Kokoda, Wiad, Pirung).*

'Areas like Lihir, Tonda, and Bagiai are exceptions to this rule and hence require more efforts to protect them from the variety of threats they are currently facing.'

If this is the case it begs the question as to why the Kokoda Initiative isn't doing its job through the Conservation Environment Protection Authority (CEPA) and focusing on priority areas facing a higher degree of environmental threat such as Lihir, Tonda, and Bagiai.

It's also worth noting that a recent attempt by the DFAT-Kokoda Initiative to have the Kokoda Trail listed as a World Heritage Site was unsuccessful after an expert on World Heritage, [Dr Peter Hitchcock](#), revealed it did not meet the international criteria for such a listing.

A more recent report in 2018 regarding an '[Assessment for the Management Effectiveness for Papua New Guinea's Protected Areas](#)' advised:

'Two major, largen Pas (Tonda and Maza WMAs rated as only in fair condition, due to multiple threats and lack of law enforcement capacity.'

The latest attempt to wrest control of the Kokoda Trail seems to reflect a desire to create an aid-funded environment empire in PNG. The proposed '[Kokoda Track Management Authority](#)' (KTMA) Act developed by the Kokoda Initiative Strategic Advisor, [Mr. Mark Nizette MBE](#) will sit beside the '[Climate Change and Development Authority](#)' within the [Conservation Environment Protection Authority](#).

Mark Nizette's proposed KTMA Bill will represent a [suicide note for pilgrimage tourism](#) across the Kokoda Trail if it is approved by the PNG Government.

Sandy Hollway - Kevin Rudd's 'Special Envoy' to Kokoda

In late 2008 Prime Minister Rudd appointed Mr Sandy Hollway as his '*special envoy to Kokoda*' to address increasing tensions between the Kokoda Development Program, the Kokoda Initiative, the Kokoda Track Authority, the two Provincial Governments, Local Level Government Wards, village communities and tour operators.

Hollway was a highly respected official however he also knew little about PNG or the complexities and subtleties of the '*Melanesian Way*'.

I arranged a meeting to brief him on the strategy we had adopted through the Kokoda Track Foundation to engage village communities and to introduce Colonel David Knaggs with a recommendation that he be engaged as part of his team to assist in facilitating meetings and workshops with PNG stakeholders.

Knaggs had served with the PNGDF during his army career, is fluent in Tok Pisin, had an empathetic understanding of PNG culture, and had trekked Kokoda. He was a former Director of Communications and Information Systems for the Australian Defence Force and worked as a consultant for Templeton-Galt where he was engaged to facilitate workshops in Port Moresby, Kokoda, and Sydney for the Kokoda Track Foundation in the lead-up to the development of their strategic plan for the Kokoda Trail.

I also recommended that Mr. Sandy Lawson be engaged as part of the team. Sandy had worked in PNG as an agricultural scientist for more than 40 years, was fluent in *Tok-Pisin*, Motu, Koiari and Orokaiva '*Ples Tok*'. He was highly respected by traditional landowners across the Trail as he had worked with them for a couple of decades.

Neither Knaggs nor Lawson were ever contacted, and it was soon evident that Hollway had been engaged to provide a political fix for Canberra rather than seek a management solution for PNG.

Apart from the conduct of a few talkfests (forums) and the official opening of an aid-funded health centre in Efogi village there were no identifiable outcomes from the forums he conducted.

We were then advised of a Kokoda Initiative plan to engage a 'Chief Ranger' to bring some order along the Trail.

We recommended that one of our trek leaders, Captain Reg Yates, be engaged.

Yates was well qualified for the position. He is Australia's foremost expert in WW11 battlefields in PNG and has documented them all over a 35-year period. He authored the Australian Army Guide for Adventure Training in PNG, is fluent in *Tok Pisin*, and has been trekking Kokoda for more than 35 years. He is well respected by elders along the Trail and is also a trained paramedic and Ambulance officer. I suggested he could train and qualify local village rangers in advanced remote area First Aid, assist with training health officers in medical clinics, prepare a detailed trail maintenance plan, conduct an audit of health centres across the Trail, and train local rangers in their traditional areas of responsibility.

He was never given the courtesy of an interview and the current Ranger system is defunct.

The Kokoda Initiative established an agreement with [Queensland Parks](#) to engage rangers on six-figure salary packages to train PNG rangers for the Trail. These rangers have no previous experience in PNG, no language skills, no knowledge of the complexities of local clan relationships across the Trail, and no understanding of the reality of the Kokoda trekking industry!

On reflection it seems the DFAT Kokoda Initiative had an unwritten policy of not engaging former military or Australian expats even though their previous experience in PNG, their qualifications, language skills, and empathy with PNG culture equips them well to give informed advice.

The two programs were eventually amalgamated, and Australian environment officials were embedded in the Conservation Environment Protection Authority (CEPA) and the Kokoda Track Authority (KTA).

The Villagers

If our Government focus had been on villagers one of our first priorities would have been to follow the money trail.

We now know that some \$70 million (PNGK175) million has washed through village economies since we led our first group across the Trail in 1992.

We also know there are low levels of financial literacy in subsistence village communities but, apart from that, we have no idea how they have invested this money. If this was known we would be in a much better position to provide training programs to assist them.

I have observed little change within the physical structure of village communities during my 101 treks over the past 32 years. The only noticeable improvement in the larger villagers has been the construction of Lysaght type church buildings on large concrete slabs.

The report from [Pacific Islands Projects](#) in 2014 found that many villagers from larger communities live in Port Moresby rather than their original village. This is most likely due to better prospects for job opportunities improved access to education for their children – but this is just a guess.

A priority focus on villagers would have resulted in the engagement of financial advisors familiar with the formal and informal sectors of PNG and the *Melanesian Way*.

This process would allow authorities to develop basic financial literacy programs and advice on savings and investments.

Our Political Conundrum

The Kokoda Trail did not rate on Canberra's political agenda in the 1990s.

During this time I made numerous submissions on the issue to the Minister for Veterans Affairs and other relevant departments. I also travelled to Canberra to discuss the issues with them however it soon evident that, despite Prime Minister Keating's fine speeches on the 50th anniversary of the Kokoda campaign, the political caravan had moved as the following extracts from Ministerial correspondence attest:

4 November 1992:

'While the proposals you have outlined in your letter of 25 August (1992) to the Prime Minister have undoubted merit, I can give no undertaking that anything of that nature would fall within the scope of the commemorative measures now under consideration.'

The Hon Ben Humphreys MP
Minister for Veterans Affairs

22 February 1995:

'The Government's philosophy is to commemorate and celebrate the 50th anniversary of the end of World War II with activities here in Australia. The only specific events relating to 'Australia Remembers' planned for overseas are three small pilgrimages of Australian veterans.'

The Hon Con Sciacca MP
Minister for Veterans Affairs

24 June 1997:

‘As a result it is not possible to award the Civilian Service Medal to the ‘Fuzzy Wuzzy Angels’ at this distance in time.’

The Hon David Jull MP
Minister for Administrative Services

10 November 1997:

‘Your suggestion to form a small working group has merit. However, I do not recommend proceeding in this way at this time.’

The Hon Bruce Scott MP
Minister for Veterans Affairs

11 December 2000:

‘Your proposal to develop the Trail is unfortunately outside the scope of the Australian aid program.’

Senator Kay Patterson
Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Foreign Affairs

7 December 2000:

‘With these limitations in mind, I regret I am unable to offer any prospect of achieving the all-of-government approach you seek in the time frame you propose.’

The Hon Bruce Scott MP
Minister for Veterans Affairs

13 January 2001:

‘I believe you have presented to the Government an excellent proposal and initial plan to establish the Kokoda Track (or Trail) as a National Memorial Park – long overdue!’

Stan Bisset AM MC
President, 2/14th Battalion Association

7 February 2001:

‘Because of the above reasons and in consultation with the Chiefs of the villages along the Trail, I demanded a compensation of A\$2,000,000.00 for developments along the Trail. This was not for Oro Province as a whole. However, after receiving your letter, I held discussions with the Chiefs and Councillors from the area and explained the contents of your letter in which I must say, all leaders from the area are happy with your efforts in going as far as preparing a proposal which is now before the Australian Government to develop a Master Plan for the development of the Kokoda Trail as a National Memorial Park.’

The Hon Sylvanus Siembo MP
Governor, Oro Province

18 February 2001:

‘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 . . . I regret that I am unable to satisfy your demand for such a large scale approach to this issue.’

The Hon Bruce Scott MP
Minister for Veterans Affairs

8 March 2001:

‘The Australian High Commission in Port Moresby welcomes Mr Lynn’s enthusiasm and commitment to develop the Kokoda Track. We acknowledge the contributions he has made in the past and note that he is highly regarded in a number of communities for his assistance. Like many Australians, he has a strong belief in the Track’s historical importance and can see its potential as a source of revenue for local people and of education and personal development for young Australians in particular. My staff and I have met with Mr Lynn on a number of occasions during his visits to Port Moresby, and we accept that he is pursuing his proposals in order to advance what he believes is in the best interests of the Kokoda Track and its people.’

H.E. Nick Warner
Australian High Commissioner to Papua New Guinea

19 March 2001:

'Your interest and commitment to the development of the Kokoda Track reflects your strong desire to improve the living conditions of its communities. In this regard our High Commissioner to Papua New Guinea greatly values your interest and suggestions, especially with respect to small-scale projects that might fit into their preferred strategy currently being developed. I trust this letter will be useful in finally resolving the issue of why my Department will not promote the creation of a National Memorial Park.'

The Hon Bruce Scott MP
Minister for Veterans Affairs

9 May 2001:

'I have noted your advice that the Papua New Guinea (PNG) Minister for National Planning is enthusiastic about your proposal. However, I believe the master plan you seek is a document most appropriately compiled by the Government of PNG. The Australian Department of Foreign Affairs may be interested in contributing to such a process that would provide aid and development initiatives to provinces along the Kokoda Track. But it is a matter for the Government of PNG to decide if a master plan is appropriate and what organisations might be represented on any committee brought together for the preparation of such a document. Consequently, I trust that you will understand why I will not be selecting staff from my Department to participate on your project team.'

The Hon Bruce Scott MP
Minister for Veterans Affairs

17 May 2001:

(Response to The Hon Dr Brendan Nelson MP, Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Defence)

'In view of the current situation on the Kokoda Track it would be inadvisable for the Australian Government to promote a proposal for the Track's development. The subject of Mr Lynn's proposal is a matter, in the first instance, for the Government of PNG. It would be inappropriate for a group of Australian bureaucrats to walk the Track and develop a master plan in isolation to the situation on the ground..'

The Hon Bruce Scott MP
Minister for Veterans Affairs

17 May 2001:

'Thank you for your e-mail of 24 April 2001 to a number of Members of Parliament, Senators and others, regarding your proposal to create a Kokoda National Memorial Park in Papua New Guinea. I have previously explained why I do not support your proposal at the present time and trust that you will refer to my earlier letters on this matter. Mr Nick Warner, Australian High Commissioner to PNG, has provided advice that your proposal is premature and inappropriate at this stage.'

The Hon Bruce Scott MP
Minister for Veterans Affairs

16 July 2001:

'Having discussed this matter with representatives of the Papua New Guinea Government I have found no support for a park along the lines you have suggested. Other options were discussed but, in view of the social problems in the area associated with the Track, these alternatives have not been developed.'

Senator Robert Hill
Minister for the Environment and Heritage

10 August 2001:

'As far as I am aware, the social problems associated with the track are continuing. Until such a time as these can be resolved by the people and Government of Papua New Guinea, and there is official PNG Government support for a memorial park, I am unable to consider expending resources and staff to work on a project team as you suggest.'

Senator Robert Hill
Minister for the Environment and Heritage

18 September 2001:

'In previous correspondence, I have stated clearly that no such trek will be taking place while the security situation in the area remains uncertain and current High Commission travel advisories are in place. Further, officials and advisers on this issue have no need to embark on such a walk at public expense to capture the obvious importance of appropriate memorials being established along the Track. All members

of the committee have a comprehensive understanding of the significance of the Track and what it means to the Australian community . . . the intend of the inter-departmental committee is to consider all proposals for the Track and to develop a co-ordinated response for consideration by this Government. Therefore and trek along the lines that you have proposed would be inappropriate, unnecessary and could be deemed as prejudicial to the deliberations of the committee.'

The Hon Bruce Scott MP
Minister for Veterans Affairs

28 September 2001:

'I appreciate that there would be a great deal of planning required for such a trek but wish to reiterate that no such trek will be taking place while the security situation in the area remains uncertain and current High Commission travel advisories are in place. Further, members of the committee are already aware of the significance of the Track and the importance to the Australian community.'

The Hon Bruce Scott MP
Minister for Veterans Affairs

17 October 2001:

'With regards to the trek, I wish to reiterate that the IDC is aware of the significance of the Kokoda Track and that as I advised previously, no such trek will be taking place while the security situation in the area remains uncertain and current High Commission travel advisories are in place.'

The Hon Bruce Scott MP
Minister for Veterans Affairs

26 October 2001:

'The IDC currently has no plans to take part in a trek across the Track. All members of the committee have a comprehensive understanding of the significance of the Track and what it means to the Australian community.'

Dr Peter Poggioli
Chief of Staff to the Minister for Education, Training and Youth Affairs

29 October 2001:

'Thank you for the recent information you sent regarding your proposals for the 'big picture' plans for the track and I wish you well. I agree that the Minister for Veterans Affairs is a hard person to deal with having spoken with a lot of the veterans and also seen the problems we have had. Good luck with getting politicians to cross the track . . . The problem I see is that without a co-ordinated approach, everyone goes off doing their little bits and it all gets confusing. A lot of people aren't aware of the problems that occur in PNG in trying to achieve outcomes, etc. After 3 years living there, the real problems of corrupt and unintelligent government members, cronyism, wantokism, compensation and cargo cult become very apparent. Anyway Charlie, I wish you luck and if there is anything I can do to assist, please let me know.'

Ian Hopley
Australian Police Advisor in PNG
Executive Committee Member and Trustee, 2/14th Battalion Association

27 November 2001:

'I am pleased to advise that the National Executive of the RSL has endorsed the proposal to establish a master plan for the development of the Kokoda Track Memorial Park. Thank you for taking the time to address our National Executive and for the personal effort you have put into promoting this concept.'

Major-General Peter Phillips AO MC (Retd)
National President, Returned Services League

25 January 2002:

'Thank you for your letter of 6 December 2001 congratulating me on my recent appointment as Minister for Veterans Affairs. . . In response to you invitation to discuss your proposal for the development of the Kokoda Track as a National Memorial Park, I wish to endorse the comments of my predecessor. The inter-departmental committee (IDC) on Kokoda is currently considering all proposals for the Track and developing a co-ordinated response for consideration by this government.'

The Hon Danna Vale MP
Minister for Veterans Affairs

30 July 2002:

'I do however wish to draw your intention to the fact that the inter-departmental committee report was established to examine Australia's interests in Kokoda Track Development and to determine ways to

enhance public recognition of its importance to Australians. Whilst the IDC included provision in the longer term for outlining a process for cooperative development, its purpose was not to develop a master plan for the future development of the Kokoda Track. . .'

The Hon Danna Vale MP
Minister for Veterans Affairs

It was soon evident that Danna Vale was used as yet another '*useful idiot*' by her Department of Veterans Affairs (DVA) bureaucrats who were ambivalent about the Kokoda Trail.

Meanwhile in PNG the CEO of the Tourism Promotion Authority, Peter Vincent, was optimistic about the potential of the 50th anniversary of the Kokoda campaign. In contrast to Canberra's ambivalence he convened numerous meetings in the lead up to the anniversary.

Vincent, a former marketing manager for Air Niugini, understood the value of international tourism and was well placed to co-ordinate the potential of pilgrimage tourism across the Kokoda Trail.

Unfortunately he was hampered by the fact his Tourism Ministers were ranked towards the bottom of the political pecking order among politicians who favoured portfolios in the natural resources sector due to the financial benefits associated with them. The tourism sector did not attract any royalty income or aid-funding. Their political 'benefits' were therefore limited to a few overseas trips each year – far less than their colleagues appointed to the mining, forestry, fisheries, and environment portfolios.

However, after the opening of the Isurava Memorial by Prime Ministers John Howard and Sir Michael Somare on the 60th anniversary of the Kokoda campaign the number of trekkers increased rapidly along with revenue from trek permit fees.

A higher level of political interest coincided with Australia's announcement of a \$15 million annual aid-package for the Kokoda Trail in 2008.

The funds were washed through CEPA as the aid package was directed towards assisting PNG to obtain a World Heritage listing for the Kokoda Trail and nearby Owen Stanley Rangers rather than in the identification, interpretation and protection of significant battle-sites across the Kokoda Trail.

The Annette Dean DEI Management Experiment

Management officials selected by Canberra for the PNG Kokoda Track Authority had no previous experience with PNG, any commercial business qualifications; any understanding of the *Melanesian Way*, or any qualification in military history - their previous experience was related to environment management in national parks.

Ms. Annette Dean was the first Australian official appointed by Canberra as CEO of the Kokoda Track Authority in early 2009. She was recruited because of her previous experience with Tasmanian walking tracks but only lasted five months in the job before returning to Tasmania.

By this stage Warren Bartlett had established an office in the Brian Bell Centre at Boroko, Port Moresby.

Dean was assisted by Silas Sutherland, who was employed as her Chief Operations Officer in February 2009.

In a chance meeting at Boroko Foodworld, Warren Bartlett had a conversation with Silas Sutherland. He advised that tour companies were frustrated over the current situation and looking forward to the management issues being addressed in time for the 2009 trekking period. Sutherland replied that '*it would not hurt them to have to wait another year*'! It was clear he had no idea of the complexities involved in managing Kokoda tourism.

Irwin was yet another Port Moresby based Canberra official on a secure aid-funded salary. He had made no attempt to consult with professional tour companies to gain an insight into the reality of a management system based on the ‘*law of the jungle*’.

Irwin was followed by an influx of environment officials with no previous experience with PNG, Melanesian culture, military history, pilgrimage tourism, or commercial enterprise. It was soon clear they had arrived to manage the environment at the expense of pilgrimage tourism.

Their appointments were initially welcomed as Kokoda tour operators were crying out for some order to the management chaos on the Trail - our expectations were short lived.

On 15 February 2009, CEO Annette Dean’s first email advised:

‘Greetings to all trek operators from the new Kokoda Track Authority management.

‘It is a challenging but positive time for the KTA, as we work with our new board of management to ensure that trekking (and trekking finances) on the Kokoda Track are well managed and that we provide strategic assistance to the villages on the Kokoda Track. We hope that in the future we have a world class ecotourism destination, whilst ensuring that walking the track continues to be a unique and challenging experience.

‘We do ask for your patience during our current setting up phase.’

She went on to advise:

‘Ward Development Groups

‘KTA is now establishing local Ward Development Groups for the distribution of trek fees to assist villagers. We are developing a constitution for these committees, which will include guidelines on how money may be spent – to include personal assistance (such as school fees), community assistance, and ecotourism business assistance. We are obviously under pressure to set these groups up quickly, and these guidelines may be reviewed in the future.

‘Despite being flooded with demands, we are no longer funding individual requests for assistance from landowners. Our board has made the decision that we only provide assistance through the Ward Development Groups. This is the first step in developing a system of ensuring that our assistance is given strategically, and that villagers themselves decide how they would like funding assistance spent.

‘2009 trekking season

‘Trekking fees are vitally important for the funding of our Ward Development Groups, track maintenance and other operational expenses.

‘We would appreciate payment of 2008 trek fees to help us deal with the urgent management issues relating to the track. The new management is now working within a tight budget. At this stage we have no funding from the PNG government.’

In the meantime no attempts were made by Annette Dean or Silas Sutherland to consult with Kokoda tour operators who had been operating across the Kokoda Trail over the previous 17 years and no information was forthcoming regarding plans for managing the 2009 trekking season.

Dean’s major concern seemed to be related to her personal safety when walking between the carpark and her office each day.

Her appointment was obviously an outcome of a DEI selection process which did not appreciate the reality of the PNG working environment in Boroko for an Australian woman.

She was reassigned to Australia after a couple of months of non-productivity.

On her return to Australia she made unsubstantiated and somewhat outrageous statements in the Australian media – most likely to cover for her own shortcomings.

The Examiner newspaper reported:

‘DEATH threats, corruption and demands for money were daily challenges for Annette Dean in Papua New Guinea as Kokoda Track Authority chief executive. Mrs Dean, of Blackwall, on the West Tamar, returned on Thursday from five months in PNG in charge of the track made famous by Australian soldiers during World War II.

‘Mrs Dean was recruited last year to assist the PNG Government counter what is claimed was a degree of mismanagement and corruption in the authority.

‘Before she got to Kokoda money was going to corrupt board members and others in Port Moresby instead of being spent on track upgrades or local communities.

‘But not all changes were accepted by staff with one, a convicted murderer, making threats against her life. "He was six foot four (190cm) and built like a sumo wrestler, and he was demanding compensation for losing his job," she said.

‘In another incident, an angry landowner tried to attack her in her car. *"I needed my own special security guard to escort me from the office to where my car was,"* she said.

‘Mrs Dean was one of two Australians to head the authority, which trained locals and converted the authority into a sustainable organisation over 15 months. *"One of the reasons I was asked to work in PNG was because of my background in managing walking tracks,"* she said. Mrs Dean had worked for years on various Tasmanian tracks and said it was great preparation for her time at Kokoda.

"Kokoda is similar to the tracks in Tasmania as it has the same issues of high rainfall and steep terrain, which causes high levels of erosion," she said. Working with local Aboriginal communities in western NSW also helped in her approach to the job.

‘Mrs Dean was chief executive in April when two Australians died on the track but said the authority did not play a direct role with the private tour groups. However, they have been working in setting up a much better regulated system that registers well-prepared and qualified companies. "People need to do their research and find a company which carries things such as a satellite phone, first-aid kit and are well trained," she said.

‘Some of the most rewarding parts of her time in PNG were working with and gaining strong relationships and support from the local communities and attending the Anzac service in Isurava, she said. Despite the hardships and challenges Mrs Dean said her time in Kokoda was rewarding and she intends to return later in the year.’

In an interview with Felicity Ogilive on [ABC radio](#) she reported:

‘My position was as CEO handing over to another person who has taken over that role of CEO of the Kokoda Track Authority. However, it was an extremely challenging situation to be in and in PNG when you are in a situation where you are having to sack staff, deal with fraud and corruption issues as well, you know, my personal safety was compromised while I was over there and so it was a good thing for me to have made those major changes in setting up a really, what we now have an efficient system in the way the KTA is being run and very, very strict financial procedures.’

It is clear from these interviews that Mrs. Dean sought to cover her own shortcomings as CEO with unsubstantiated statements. For example:

- I have never met any PNG official as tall as ‘six foot four (190cm) built like a sumo wrestler’ who was also a ‘convicted murderer’ working in the KTA office;
- There were no staff employed at the time Ms Dean commenced her assignment – it is therefore assumed that if she did have to sack anybody it would be somebody she would have employed. ‘Finish pay’ or compensation is also a common practice for PNG workers who lose their jobs.

- One should be sceptical about the claim of a landowner ‘attacking her car’. If this was the case there would have been some history between her and the landowner.
- Ms Dean was only engaged as CEO for about five months – her statement regarding the ‘training of locals and converting the authority in a sustainable organisation over 15 months’ is therefore not true.
- Ms Dean’s claim regarding ‘working with and gaining strong relationships and support from the local communities’ is clearly not true – she did not walk across the Trail to meet with them and was not in the position long enough to establish any form of relationship with the ‘*Melanesian Way*’.
- ‘. . . and so it was a good thing for me to have made those major changes in setting up a really, what we now have an efficient system in the way the KTA is being run and very, very strict financial procedures.’ This is pure fantasy. Ms Dean did not establish a single management system and she never produced a financial report – indeed, the KTA has never produced an Annual Financial Report since 2009 so nobody has any idea where the \$5 million (K12 million) collected in trek permit fees has gone.

Warren Bartlett, former CEO of the Kokoda Track Authority later wrote:

‘I did not have much to do with Annette Dean apart from accompanying her on a couple of visits to inspect alternative office space to the Brian Bell building where she was fearful of having to walk to the carpark.

‘She preferred a larger office to accommodate more staff which had views of Fairfax Harbour. We also inspected a vacant office space above Westpac at Waigani (formerly owned by Cardno) for K20,000 + GST.

‘No such luck, but her replacement CEO negotiated with Brian Bell Property Manager to relocate upstairs for some K10,000 per month compared to the previous rent of K4,000 per month.’

Annette Dean left PNG without having any impact on the management of the Kokoda Trail or pilgrimage tourism.

The Rod Hillman Era of Mismanagement

Rod Hillman was appointed by Canberra to replace Annette Dean.

He also had no previous experience in PNG, military heritage or pilgrimage tourism and did not demonstrate any understanding of commercial business management. This was evident in his use of ‘forums’ to bring everybody together to create an impression of activity.

He failed to appreciate that Kokoda tour companies are commercial competitors and not government agencies - they are therefore unlikely to share information that would benefit their competitors at forums and workshops. The reason they attended was to glean information – not to share it!

During his three year assignment as CEO of the PNG Kokoda Track Authority he never trekked across the Trail to experience the conditions or meet with village-based clan leaders and landowners.

He failed to introduce a single management system or protocol into Kokoda tourism – no campsite booking system, no database management system, no trail management system, etc. despite a 10-fold increase in staff and a significant budget increase.

When Hillman learned he was required to engage a PNG ‘counterpart CEO’ in order to satisfy the requirements for his work permit he chose James Enage from the Prime Minister’s Office. Enage was an arts graduate from the University of Papua New Guinea and a landowner from the Kokoda Trail. He had no previous commercial business experience or qualifications.

Hillman did not provide Enage with any management training or development during his tenure as CEO - nor did he put any commercial management systems in place for Kokoda tourism.

Enage was patronised with visits to Australia with his wife and children and given VIP status at various locations. As a result he was never going to rock his paymasters boat and challenge the status quo.

As a landowner across the Trail he was subject to *wan-tok* pressures which are a normal part of Melanesian society but which Hillman had no awareness of.

The following extracts from Rod Hillman's announcements and outcomes during his tenure

1. Hillman's KTA Newsletter Announcements

Rod Hillman made the following announcements regarding the introduction of an Online Booking System for trek operators:

- **September 2011**

'The online Track Permit purchasing system aims to be in place by the end of September. This will allow tour operators to purchase and print their trek permits online. A separate tour operator alert will be sent out with a tutorial in the near future.'

- **November 2011**

'The online permits system is soon to go live, which will make the process of purchasing permits convenient and easy for PNG and Australian based tour operators.'

'Trials are underway to ensure all aspects of the facility are working well. Once launched the trekkers and tour operators will be able to logon to the KTA website and purchase a permit by simply following the prompts on screen.'

'This will automatically be paid from their account into the KTA banking facility which makes secure payments. The service operates by credit card purchases through the ANZ eGate payment service.'

'Permits will take a matter of minutes. The next newsletter will provide more information on this service.'

- **December 2011**

'Track Permits Online The system is now live, allowing all Tour Operators to purchase track permits online. This convenient system was showcased at the Tour Operator Forums in October and was well received by all. Once the new year and the trekking season gets underway we are expecting to see this system being made use of more regularly as it will be the most convenient way of securing permits, saving Tour Operators time and money.'

Outcome

Hillman's Online Booking System never happened and it never went 'live' as he announced.

It is now known whether Hillman was deliberately misleading trek operators or whether he was not capable of bringing the project to fruition.

As of 2024 there are no known plans to introduce an Online Booking System.

2. Track Building and Maintenance

In September 2009 Hillman announced that *'the KTA had signed a contract with Conservation Volunteers Australia (CVA) to supply 13 professional and volunteer track builders to live in six villages along the Track for a period of six weeks'*.

He further advised that a *'volunteer tourism' project will be set up whereby CVA will promote volunteers to live in villages and work with a trained team to undertake a range of track work and conservation'*.

Outcome

This was a patronising approach to local village communities who have been maintaining tracks across the Owen Stanley Ranges for thousands of years.

Trek operators who had been operating along the trail for 18 years prior to Hillman's arrival were not consulted. These trek operators employ guides from villagers along the trail and it would have been a simple task to liaise with them to improve and maintain the trail.

The 'volunteer tourism' project announced by Hillman never happened; the CVA never returned; and in 2016 sections of the trail are unsafe and in the worst condition ever since the Australian Government assumed control of the Kokoda trekking industry in 2008.

In April 2010 Hillman announced that *'Tim Eden, NZ track expert, has been on the Track for six weeks undertaking follow-up work from last years' CVA program. No new work, except the bypass at Owers Corner due to the mini-cyclone, was undertaken, and the work focused on clearing drains and reducing visual impacts'* whatever that means!

Comment

If Hillman had not announced Tim Eden's presence nobody would have known he had been there. But the announcement does raise some important questions:

1. How much was Tim Eden paid?
2. What was the tender process for the work he supposedly did?
3. Why weren't local villagers, who have been doing this work on their land for thousands of years, not engaged and paid to do it?

4. Ward Development Committee Funding

In May 2009 Hillman announced that *'the KTA budget allows for K15,000 to be allocated to each of the 14 Ward Development Committees along the Track in 2009'*. He went on to announce that *'this process creates a clear pathway for funds collected through permit fees to be distributed to the local communities minimizing issues of individuals directly receiving the funds'*.

If he had consulted with trek operators who had been operating along the trail for 18 years before he arrived he would have learned that distributing cash to Ward councillors/committees is not the most effective way to help develop communities. He would also have learned that the most effective method of assisting local communities is to hold workshops with them to find out what their needs are; what priorities they would prefer; and then assist them with the resources (not cash) to assist them in meeting their community objectives.

In March 2010 Hillman announced that *'community meetings had a strong focus on the distribution of ward development funding as most communities are unhappy with distribution of the funds by their committees. All ward development committees have been informed that no further KTA funds will be placed into bank accounts until a full financial acquittal is received by the KTA and endorsed by the community. Any community that is not satisfied with the acquittals the KTA will support requests for legal support to gain proper acquittals'*.

This last statement demonstrated an appalling lack of understanding the reality of dealing with local village communities.

If Hillman had consulted with the PNG Department of Community Development he would have learned that they already have a successful Integrated Community Development model to work with.

He failed to do so and as of 2016 there is no evidence of any local community development programs that have been developed in any village along the trail.

5. KTA Works Advisory Committee

In November 2009 Hillman announced *'the introduction of the Works Program Advisory Committee who will work with the KTA to ensure the works undertaken on the Track meet the needs and expectations, to the best of our ability of the key stakeholders (Tour Operators, Local Community and Government).'*

No mention was made of the two most important stakeholders in the Kokoda trekking industry i.e. the paying customer or the local campsite owners.

In December 2009 Hillman advised that *'the Committee discussed the track works undertaken this season and the proposed works program for 2010. It also spent considerable time discussing management outcomes for the KTA to follow.'*

6. Capacity Building Program

In November 2009 Hillman announced *'the capacity building program of Conservation Volunteers Australia volunteers and paid track builders living in six villages is now complete. The program has trained 54 track builders within local communities along the Kokoda Track'*.

The '54 track builders' trained under this program have since gone AWOL because nothing has been added to the work the CVA volunteers completed in the last seven years.

As of 2016 environmental erosion along sections of the trail continue to deteriorate and nobody seems to care!

The solution is to introduce a K100 Trail Maintenance Levy but nobody seems interested.

7. Kokoda Alliance – Philanthropy

In December 2009 Hillman announced support for *'the development of a 'Kokoda Alliance' whereby groups and/or individuals could be actively engaged in determining the actual needs of the communities, the most effective methods of delivery and ensuring there was a way that current projects could be known to prevent replication and wasted energy'*.

He went on to announce that *'the first step is the KTA will establish a website where charitable projects can be advertised and potential sponsors can see what opportunities are available. The website will also have a forum where people can discuss their projects and authorities can provide useful information. The operation of the website will be contracted out through an expression of interest process in the New Year'*.

Outcome

The website never happened and the 'Kokoda Alliance' was never formed.

8. Tour Operators Licensing

In December 2009 Hillman announced that issues in regard to Tour Operator Licensing would be sent out by January and issues that require further work including Compulsory Public Liability Insurance and PNG Company Registration' would be address and *'it is expected these will be resolved shortly'*.

Outcome

As of 2016 the issue of Compulsory Public Liability Insurance has not been resolved and the KTA has abrogated its duty of care by approving licenses for trek operators who do not have a policy – and fail to advise their client that they are not covered.

9. Introduction of the Kokoda Track Commercial Operators License

In March 2010 Hillman announced that *‘the KTA is pleased to announce the introduction of the Kokoda Track Commercial Operators License’*. He went on to advise that *‘Trek Permits will only be issued to companies holding a valid license.’*

By the following month, June 2010, Hillman announced that licenses had been issued to 42 trek operators.

Outcome

There was no system for conducting due diligence checks of applicants for a ‘Tour Operators Licence’. This included the validation of compulsory Public Liability Insurance policies; contact numbers for satphones; the provision of VHF radios; and compliance with the Code of Conduct.

All a prospective Tour Operator had to do was turn up at the KTA office and pay a small fee and they were issued with a license. Many of the 42 trek operators issued with a license did not have an ABN/ACN in either Australia or Papua New Guinea so there was no legal protection available to trekkers who were inadvertently misled by the fact that the KTA had issued them with a license.

Trekker number continued to decline under Hillman’s watch and the issue of so many licenses made of mockery of any attempts a developing a sustainable Kokoda trekking industry.

10. Notice Boards

In March 2010 Hillman announced that *‘two community noticeboards have been erected in Efogi and Menari. Eventually there will be noticeboards in most villages along the Track where ward development payments, lists of licensed operators and other KTA related notices will be displayed.’*

Outcome

Noticeboards were eventually built in most villages as announced by Hillman but as of 2016 there is not a single notice on any one of them. They stand as silent monuments to yet another Hillman thought-bubble.

Photographs of all blank noticeboards are available on request.

11. Livelihoods Pilot Project Update

In July 2010 Hillman announced that ‘the second pilot project based at Isurava has commenced and is expected to have programs functioning soon. Please see below a table of initiated projects at Nauro and Isurava/Alola/Abuari:

Project	Anticipated Result	Approximate Timing	ACTUAL OUTCOME
Naoro 1			

Rice Farming	Rice for sale to local communities and trekkers	2011 trekking season	Not a single grain of rice was produced for anybody
Naoro 2			
Goat meat and milk	Small amounts of goat milk will be ready by Aug 2010 while meat will take at least 9-12 months	August	Goats provided by Hillman's program broke out of their compound and began foraging in the local garden. The locals killed and ate the goats.
Chicken meat and eggs	Small amounts of chicken meat and eggs ready for sale to trekkers and local communities	August 2010	Our company has led almost 200 trek groups through Nauro since Hillman's announcement. None have ever been offered a chicken or an egg!
Duck meat	Small amounts of duck meat ready for sale to trekkers and local communities	November 2010	In my 25 years of trekking I am yet to see a duck in Nauro
Fresh fruits and vegetables	Fresh fruits and vegetables ready for sale to trekkers and local communities	2011 trekking season	Our company was purchasing pineapples, bananas and paw paws from Nauro for 20 years prior to Hillman's announcement.
Isurava			
Screen printing and artefacts	Screen printed fabrics, artefacts will be ready for sale to trekkers and local communities such as pillow cases, cloth badges and draw-string bags.	August 2010	This is dream-time stuff – it was never going to happen – and it never has. The idea could only have been conceived after a long talking discussion at the Port Moresby Yacht Club!
Hot Water System	Pay p/use hot water system at Isurava Battlefield Guest House	2011 trekking season	Another Port Moresby Yacht Club dreamtime session. It has never looked like happening!
Chicken meat and eggs	Chicken meat and eggs for sale to trekkers and local communities	2011 trekking season	See above comments
Alola			
Cooking/Catering Service	Local dishes/recipes will be provided for	2011 trekking season	The only items for sale in Alola are passion-fruit; bananas, paw-

	sale to trekkers and local communities after the hygiene and food preparation workshop		paw; ‘English’ potatoes; coca-cola and twisties. It has been that way since the late 1990s and nothing has changed.
Duck meat	Small amounts of duck meat ready for sale to trekkers and local communities	November 2010	Ducks have never been sighted in Alola over the 25 years we have been trekking.
Sewing	Printed fabrics include badges, pillow cases, table cloths, wall decorations will be ready for sale to trekkers and local communities.	November 2010	Another Port Moresby Yacht Club thought-bubble. Nothing along these lines has ever been sighted in Alola and certainly have never been offered for sale.
Abuari			
Fresh fruit and vegetables	Fresh fruit and vegetables will be ready for sale to trekkers and local communities and Kokoda Women in Agriculture Business.	November 2010	Very few trek groups visit Abuari which is on the western side of the valley. Those who do have enjoyed the best spread provided by any villagers along the trail for the past 20 years – this includes fried ‘English’ potato; fried Kai Kai; fried taro; fresh scones; cake; passion-fruit; bananas, paw-paw; pineapple. Cucumber; etc. We have never heard of any organisation called ‘Kokoda Women in Agriculture Business’.
Goat meat and milk	Goat meat will be ready by October 2010 while meat will take at least 9-12 months.	November 2010	No goats have ever been sighted in Abuari.

12. Safety Package Update

In July 2010 Hillman announced that ‘the Safety Package continues to produce quick results with the Kokoda Airstrip maintenance underway, and contract signed for the design of the new terminal building at Kokoda airstrip and development of a ‘Safety Map’ for use by trekkers and operators.

Outcome

This was the Australian Government’s second attempt to build a terminal at the Kokoda airstrip.

- The first was burnt down by unknown ‘locals’ just before it was due to open in 1992.
- The second was designed and built during Hillman’s tenure as CEO of the KTA. It was obviously designed at the Port Moresby Yacht Club because it was totally inappropriate for local conditions. The ‘locals’ has since stripped it and the only thing remaining is the roof supported by beams on the concrete slab. They will be gone within 12 months. The local community obviously has no sense of ownership of the terminal building and therefore has no respect for it.

The production of the ‘Safety Map’ seems to have been a job for ‘mates’ on the consultants drip in Canberra. Hillman had been provided with an accurate, privately funded draft topographical map in good faith in 2009. The map was the result of expert input from former military personnel and a professional cartographer in Sydney. Updated information was provided after each mapping expedition in good faith.

In 2011 the Australian Department of Sustainability, Environment, Water, Population and Communities engaged a company, CartGIS, a business unit of Adventure Encounter ‘*to survey and produce a trekker and safety map for the Kokoda Track, Papua New Guinea*’.

According to the CartGIS website they were established in 2006 and ‘*are a leading consultancy services business in the Radio Communications, Emergency Management, Fire Evacuation & Cartography Industries*’.

There is no mention of any previous association with Papua New Guinea however they do mention that they support an NGO, the Kokoda Track Foundation.

The Minister for Sustainability, Environment, Water, Population and Communities refused to provide any information on the tender process for the project. However he did remove the map produced by CartGIS when he was advised that the map we provided in good faith to Hillman and his staff at the KTA had been plagiarised by CartGIS. The \$40,000 cost to the Australian taxpayer was obviously written-off and no apology was forthcoming.

Whilst the details for the tender process for the Safety Map are not known it has all the hallmarks of an ‘inside job’ within the bureaucracy of the Department of Sustainability, Environment, Water, Population and Communities.

It is worthy of note that the Kokoda Trail Topographical Map 1:50,000 developed by Adventure Kokoda over a six year period was chosen as the official map for the investigation of the fatal plane crash near Abuari on 11 August 2009. It was chosen because it is the only accurate topographical map of the Kokoda Trail.

http://www.atsb.gov.au/publications/investigation_reports/2009/air/ae-2009-050.aspx?ConID=304132

13. Enforcing License Conditions

In July 2010 Hillman announced that ‘*KTA Rangers will be checking adherence to KTA Commercial Operations License Conditions with groups on the Track. This is to enhance trekker confidence that the Kokoda Track is a safe place to trek and to reinforce management’s commitment to track safety and sustainability.*’

He went on to advise that ‘Ranger checks will include ensuring packs have a maximum weight of 25 kgs’ (this limit was approved by Hillman who at that stage had trekked Kokoda and would have been physically incapable of carrying a 25 kg pack up the first ridge after the Goldie River.

Hillman refused to listen to advice that 25 kg is too heavy for PNG guides and carriers. During our colonial era pack weights for carriers were limited to 18 kg. Whilst the PNG guides were willing enough and strong enough to carry 25 kgs they would inevitably sustain damage to their backs, hips and knees – and be beggared forever.

Hillman eventually relented and the weight limit was reduced to 22.5 kg which is still too heavy but nobody in the KTA or the Kokoda Initiative seems to care about the welfare of their own guides and carriers who the backbone of the Kokoda trekking industry.

Outcome

The Ranger system has since collapsed and they are rarely sighted along the trail. They no longer conduct any checks. Many PNG carriers are carrying in excess of 30 kg because they are desperate for work. The KTA/Kokoda Initiative offers them no protection.

14. Kokoda Track Guesthouse Certification and Trekker Toilet Guidelines

In May 2011 Hillman announced:

‘EcoSustainability (Guy Chester) has been awarded the contract to develop a Guesthouse Certification System and Guidelines for Trekker Toilets along the Kokoda Track. The contract will be completed within four months.

‘Tour operators and communities will have opportunities to contribute and comment on the Certification and Guidelines as they are developed’.

EcoSustainAbility has been engaged by the KTA to prepare a Guesthouse manual and accreditation system including a trekker toilets manual. Guy Chester of EcoSustainAbility has recently walked the track and would like some feedback and any comments from tour operators before he completes the report, which will be presented to all licensed tour operators and guesthouse owners. The aim is to have the system in place for the 2012 trekking season.

The consultation process with the guesthouse owners and operators showed very strong support for a certification program.

The program will include the guidelines being produced in English and Tok Pisin and using photographs and diagrams (possibly on a poster) to demonstrate to trekkers what the agreed standards of the accommodation are.

A training program for guesthouse owners/operators is planned for later this year, with possibly the initial accreditation reviews being undertaken before next year’s trekking season.

For Guesthouses, the framework proposed is to develop guidelines for three types of products:

Campsite (an area for camping, porters hut, dining hut, rubbish pit and toilets at minimum),

Campsite with trekkers hut (as per campsite, with a hut sometimes known as a guesthouse, porters hut, dining hut, rubbish pit and toilets at minimum); and

Guesthouse (a building for trekkers which may still be bush materials but with divided rooms, the building or site includes covered dining area, rubbish pit, toilets and shower at minimum).

Toilets

EcoSustainAbility will develop a manual for hygienic, aesthetic and low impact toilets. We are considering guidelines which allow for pit toilets (but at least 50m away from creeks to minimise health issues), with a seat and a lid. The building should have standing room and ventilation around the roof to reduce odour.

EcoSustainAbility is investigating low technology options to reduce impacts of toilets such as liming, use of worms and providing external ventilation of the pit.

Comment

Hillman did not provide any information on the tender process nor did he declare his relationship with Guy Chester who was Vice President of Eco-Tourism Australia in 1991 and 1992; Treasurer in 1995, 1996 and 1997; and Vice President again in 2000. Rod Hillman was Vice President of the same organisation in 2001, 2003, 2004 and 2005.

Hillman was appointed Chief Executive Officer of Eco-Tourism Australia after his term as CEO of the Kokoda Track Authority expired in 2012.

15. Bridge Design: Efogi, Templetons 1 and Eora Creek

In May 2011 Hillman announced:

'Final designs for the river crossings at Efogi, Templetons 1 and Eora Creek have been developed and are now ready for construction. Please note the perspective drawing below to give a clear picture of what the bridges will look like and we will wait until the end of May for any further comments from tour operators before commencing work late June/early July.'

'Things to note;

- *Bridges are made from logs sourced locally and placed within a metal frame*
- *Bridges will be five (5) metres above the normal river height to avoid flood damage*
- *Soil covered rock gabions will be used to create a ramp to access the bridges.*

Outcome

We objected to the use of any type of bridges constructed within metal frames as proposed.

The project did not proceed and bridges build by locals from local bush materials were constructed after Hillman departed PNG 12 months later.

16. Massage Rooms

In May 2012 Hillman announced:

'Livelihoods Officer, Hollen Mado, is currently preparing for the arrival of Dr Rob Gilfillen and his team later this month to deliver another key service development training to ward communities.'

'Dr Rob Gilfillen will be conducting basic massage therapy workshops for 20 selected villagers along the track.'

'Each ward has selected one male and one female representative to attend the workshop in Efogi being conducted from the 9th-14th May.'

'The training will be specifically for the basic massage techniques focusing on neck and shoulder and lower leg therapy.'

'Hopes are that this added service will create more eco-friendly jobs along the track and bring a new service to trekkers along the track.'

Outcome

Hillman did not declare that Dr Rob Gilfillen is a Doctor of Philosophy (PhD), Education. According to a Stateline Queensland report Gilfillen was a champion 1500m runner who qualified for the Montreal Olympics in the steeplechase. According to his wife Lyn he sacrificed a successful university lecturing career to coach his daughters in athletics.

There is no record of Gilfillen ever having been associated with PNG or pilgrimage tourism - it is not known how Gilfillen weaselled his way onto the KTA consultant's gravy train apart from possibly being a 'mate of a mate'!

Two massage parlours were eventually built as a result of this program. One at the Isurava Memorial and the other in Efogi village.

The parlour at the Isurava Memorial was later dismantled because of our protest about the incompatibility of such a facility at such a sacred wartime historical site.

The parlour at Efogi no longer exists. To the best of our knowledge neither parlour ever had a paying client.

No consultation was held with trek operators about the likely demands for such a facility and no surveys were conducted with trekkers i.e. the paying clients.

17. Drying Rooms

In July 2012 Hillman announced:

'Trekking will soon be able to have their clothing dried at Efogi as a pilot project is underway to build drying rooms.'

'Contracts have been secured by local teams to construct and operate the facilities and further development on design currently underway.'

'This concept was developed as communities saw a need with trekkers often reaching Efogi with wet clothes which are difficult to walk in and heavier to carry.'

'If the pilot project is successful, more drying rooms maybe set up along the Track at other locations.'

This project was initiated without any consultation with trek operators or without any surveys being conducted with trekkers i.e. paying customers.

Our company has conducted approximately 90 treks through Efogi village since 2012 and we camp at the community campsite on Efoge Creek. We have never sighted the drying room that Hillman announced and nobody has ever brought it to our attention.

In addition to this there is no demand for drying rooms across the trail. Every campsite has a Haus Draai which allows trekkers to hang the clothing they have washed over the fire as they have done for the past 25 years we have been trekking.

There has been no further information on Hillman's 'drying room' concept and no evidence of it progressing beyond his newsletter announcement.

18. Timber Mill Training

In August 2012 Hillman announced:

'The Livelihoods Timber Mill Project is up and running with the successful completion of training of six recruits three of whom are from Efogi and another three from Kokoda.

'STIHL, Cannings Outdoor Power Equipment and Hardware Haus Limited recently supported the project by donating the two timber mills and the six chainsaws, as well as free training by experts from their respective organisations.

'City Pharmacy Limited also added to this by supplying a First Aid kit to each timber mill site.

'Training took place in Efogi from 10-12th July and was completed by the six attendees with great success.

'The Environmental Policy is in draft stages and is hoped to be finalised shortly, these guidelines are important in ensuring the project is sustainable and doesn't have a negative impact on the surrounding Track areas.

"Our priority is to ensure the environmental effects are managed by the best possible practises and also a reasonable pricing is set for the Timber Mill usage, once the research is finalised and approved we will then allow operations to begin," says Hollen Mado, Livelihoods Officer.

'The Timber Mills are expected to be in operation in the coming month.

'The Timber Mill project is an important development element that directly addresses the need of the local communities along the Track. While this is an important aspect of development, the management aspect of the project itself is another challenge that will be closely monitored and managed.

'KTA appeals to local communities to take responsibility and operate within the set operational/environmental guidelines for the Milled Timber Project, if the program is to be sustainable.

'With this project underway, we hope that local communities will improve their standard of living by building better houses and community buildings for themselves.'

Outcome

Hillman was obviously unaware that local villagers had been operating walkabout sawmills for at least a decade before his arrival in PNG.

Walkabout sawmills were used to harvest timber for the guesthouse at Deniki new buildings in Naduri. The harvested land was then left to regenerate and a decade later there was no sign of it ever having been harvested. This has been common practice for local villagers for centuries. They didn't need a taxpayer funded 'village livelihoods' program to work it out!

There is no known 'milled timber project' in operation as a result of this program.

Hillman's salary package during his tenure was approximately K750,000 per year (I obtained this information through a question to the Senate Estimates committee).

The only beneficiaries in the Kokoda trekking industry during his tenure were Australian consultants who had tapped into the lucrative boomerang aid cycle. There has not been a single positive outcome for the Kokoda trekking industry from the reports they have filed!

If CEPA has any money to spend they should use it to upgrade the toilets along the trail to an acceptable standard – there is not a single one along the entire trail that meets the requirements of the paying customer i.e. the trekker – they are a putrid and some cause female trekkers to dry retch when they use them.

By the time Hillman handed over the reins to his ‘counterpart CEO’ he left him with the responsibility of dealing with National, Provincial and Local Level Government officials, almost 80 Kokoda tour companies, hundreds of landowners and patronising Australian environment officials – but no qualified staff or management tools to assist him.

During his tenure as CEO trekker numbers fell by 36 percent from a peak of 5621 in 2008 to 3597 in 2012.

Not one of the five key strategies or 33 objectives in the ‘KTA Strategic Plan: 2012-2015 he developed were ever achieved.

A review of the newsletters published by Hillman during his term as CEO shows that his office operated in a parallel universe to the reality of conducting trekking operations across the Trail. Most of his announcements never came to fruition but it never mattered because there was no mechanism for holding him accountable.

According to Hillman’s self-description of his job on his LinkedIn Profile:

‘A decision was made by the Australian and PNG Governments to support the Kokoda Track Authority (KTA) as a part of a greater exercise to bring certainty to the future of the Kokoda Track and benefits to the local communities and PNG as a whole. A key element of this support was the funding, by the Australian Government, of the role of Chief Executive to provide direction, management, mentoring and to rebuild trust with all its stakeholders after a turbulent period where the entire previous Board and Management was replaced.

‘My role has been to re-establish the organisation, build a culture of accountability, good governance and trust and to develop its associated systems, staffing structure, relationships (including with the PNG and Australian Governments), local community and tour operators. The key has been to rebuild trust with the stakeholders and to then maintain this trust.

‘The organisation is now in a position where the main stakeholders have been engaged, financial and administrative processes and policies are in place, the Board of Management functions appropriately, a new staff structure has been implemented, tour operator licensing has been introduced, funding Agreements have been acquitted and local staff have taken over the management roles. I now fulfill the role of an Advisor providing mentoring support.

‘A clear demonstration of trust and confidence others now place in the KTA is that major contracts have been gained such as the delivery of the Safety Package (\$4.2M), Livelihoods project (\$1.2M) and Project Management of the Variata National Park redevelopment.’

Rather than ‘build trust’ as claimed he built a wall of secrecy around his operation. He negotiated confidential deals with rogue tour companies which gave them a financial advantage over those who complied with the requirement to pay the full amount owing for trek permit fees. He failed to publish any annual financial reports. He failed to prosecute corrupt officials. He failed to distribute Annual Reports to key stakeholders.

Hillman stonewalling of our requests for information led us to lodge a Freedom of Information Request to obtain a copy of first Annual Report to the Chief Secretary of the PNG Prime Minister’s department, Mr Manasupe Zurenuoc, as he was required to do. The report, at Attachment A, was completely redacted which confirmed our suspicions that Rod Hillman was put in place to manage the

politics as opposed to managing Kokoda tourism for the benefit of the two primary stakeholders, i.e., tour companies who generated the income and those who own the land sacred to our shared military heritage.

Summary of the Annette Dean – Rod Hillman Era

Both Annette Dean and Rod Hillman spoke about the ‘corruption’ they had to address, however their record shows they dodged their responsibilities in this regard. Neither had trekked across the Trail so they had no idea of the cultural complexities of village life or their needs.

Hillman was presented with evidence of rogue Australian tour companies trekking without permits and rogue Kokoda Track Authority board members misappropriating funds on a large scale as well as lodging vexatious land claims.

Rather than act against the rogue tour operators Hillman negotiated confidential deals which let them off the hook, then claimed to have resolved the issue, and wrote a personal references for the biggest dodger and least reputable tour operator on the Trail: [Wayne Wetherall – Kokoda Spirit](#).

He was also aware of evidence that a KTA Board member had misappropriated around K250,000 from Kokoda Track Authority bank accounts but failed to prosecute him.

Neither Dean nor Hillman sought advice and seemed to be unwilling to accept any which was offered in good faith discussions.

They were unaware that the former CEO, Warren Bartlett, maintained meticulous financial records due to his previous 39 years’ experience in PNG Government administration. Rather than consult with him they attempted to smear his reputation with vague references to the ‘corruption’ they inherited. [The facts, on this link, tell a different story!](#)

The Mark Nizette Era of Influence

In 2011, the Acting Assistant Secretary, International Heritage and Policy Branch, Mark Nizette, was reassigned from Canberra to Port Moresby as a ‘management advisor’ with the DFAT funded ‘Kokoda Initiative’ in the Department of Environment and Conservation which was later rebadged as the Conservation Environment Protection Authority.

A change in Government in 2012 saw former Minister for Foreign Affairs and former Deputy Prime Minister, The Hon John Pundari MP, sworn in as Minister for Environment and Conservation.

Pundari was one of the most influential members of Prime Minister Peter O’Neill’s new government.

Since his election to the PNG Parliament in 1992 [Pundari had created an extensive business empire](#) which included more than 30 private companies. One of those, Millenium Guards, was reported as ‘*employing 1,780 people in 2015 and had net assets of over K22 million*’. Among Millennium’s clients were Malaysian logging giant, Rimbunan Hijau.

It is not known if Mark Nizette reported this apparent conflict of interest with DFAT or whether he turned a blind eye to it.

Soon after, Pundari appointed a ‘Ministerial Kokoda Initiative Committee’ within CEPA and Nizette was appointed secretary. This placed him in an influential position as no other members of the committee had ever trekked across the Trail.

His influence was also enhanced as a result of his influence in the approval process for aid-funded projects across the Trail.

At the same time the Board of the Kokoda Track Authority appointed by the Minister for Provincial and Local Level Government Affairs withered on the vine as they did not have the expertise or the funding to execute their responsibilities regarding Kokoda tourism. They were also tainted by allegations of corruption.

In the meantime the role of the Tourism Promotion Authority (TPA) was unofficially relegated to membership of Pundari's Kokoda Initiative - their Minister was no match for the influence exercised by Pundari and Nizette.

DFAT officials ignored their responsibility to assist PNG in rationalising the legal demarcation between the Minister's for Provincial and Local Level Government Affairs; Environment, Conservation and Climate Change; and Tourism, Arts and Culture regarding pilgrimage tourism across the Kokoda Trail.

The result has been a 41 percent fall in pilgrimage tourism since Canberra assumed responsibility for the Kokoda Trail in 2009.

The significance of 'military heritage' across the Trail was further reduced when DEWHA was rebadged as the Department of Sustainability, Environment, Water, Population and Communities (DSEWPC) - 'Heritage' was removed from the title and the First Assistant Secretary we had been dealing with, James Shelvin, moved on.

Under DEWHA/DPEWPC management the KTA enjoyed a 10-fold increase in staff and a multi-million dollar budget via the DFAT Kokoda Initiative to manage Kokoda tourism.

But rather than getting out onto the Trail with professional tour companies to gain an understanding of trekkers aspirations and the needs of guides, porters, campsite owners and villagers they chose to lock themselves behind their computers within their Port Moresby offices and conduct meetings and forums to 'build capacity'; develop 'mentoring programs'; look at 'gender equity' issues; and follow the dictates of Canberra regarding ill-conceived 'village livelihood' type projects.

The needs of pioneering tour companies for basic management systems to support villagers to develop campsites; to allow operators to book them in advance; to manage trek itineraries; to maintain the Trail; to introduce micro-business initiatives for landowners; and to identify, restore and interpret historic battlesites, were ignored.

The *law of the jungle* therefore continued to prevail which resulted in bitter disputes along the Trail as different trek groups with a combined total of up to 50-60 trekkers would arrive at remote campsites with a capacity for 15-20! Some rogue tour companies did not supply enough meals for their trekkers and PNG guides. Others did not have any trained medical staff or communications equipment which resulted in a couple of preventable deaths.

These experiences led to negative publicity and a serious decline in trekker numbers under the new Kokoda Initiative-CEPA-KTA regime.

In 2012 the Australian management contingent transferred responsibility for managing Kokoda tourism to their PNG counterparts who had no business management qualifications or experience.

They had not received any management training and were not even left with a database management program to help them run the operation.

All they inherited was a glossy '[Kokoda Track Strategic Plan: 2012-2015](#)' - it was no surprise that not one of the five key strategies or 33 objectives was achieved during that period.

Their plan has since been quietly shelved and no attempt has been made to revisit the topic since then.

World Heritage Listing

The 2009 Joint Understanding sought to ensure *‘the World Heritage values of the Kokoda Track and Owen Stanley Ranges are understood and, where appropriate, protected’* - a key feature of the Joint Understanding related to the Brown River catchment which was identified as *‘a future water and power supply opportunity for Port Moresby.’*

DEWHA officials were therefore dispatched to PNG to assist in implementing their objectives within the Joint Understanding.

While they were engaging consultants, facilitating meetings, organising forums and conducting workshops a Chinese investor built a \$280 million dam on the Brown River as part of the [Edevu Hydro Power Project](#) – this effectively solved the problem identified in the Joint Understanding.

Then in 2015 an expert report from the late Dr. Peter Hitchcock and Dr. Jennifer Gabriel revealed that the Kokoda Trail did not meet the criteria for a [World Heritage listing](#).

Rather than refocus on military heritage Canberra officials within the DFAT Kokoda initiative realigned their strategy towards establishing an ‘Interim Protection Zone’ to have it declared as a ‘protected area’.

Decline in Trekker Numbers

Since the Australian Government assumed responsibility for the Kokoda Trail in 2009 under the terms of the Joint Understanding signed in 2008, the number of Australians trekking across it has almost halved.

The primary reason for the fall is the DFAT Kokoda Initiative-CEPA focus on social-environment issues rather than assisting PNG to manage their most popular tourism destination as a tourism enterprise for the economic benefit of traditional landowner communities across the Trail.

Increase in Illegal Trek Operators

According to PNG Investment Promotion Authority (IPA) records, Adventure Kokoda Pty Ltd, is the only Australian Kokoda tour company to have fully complied with their IPA Act.

Compliance costs and taxation obligations have placed the company at a serious financial disadvantage to those who do not comply as a result.

Kokoda Initiative-CEPA-KTA have turned a blind eye to the proliferation of illegal Kokoda tour companies who flout their law. The KTA has continued to issue licenses in breach of their own ‘Kokoda Tour Operators Conditions 2012’.

Revocation of Adventure Kokoda Tour Operators License

Our attempts to address the ineptness of the management of Kokoda tourism since the Acting CEO, Julius Wargari, was appointed five years ago led to the cancellation of our Adventure Kokoda tour operators license by the Minister for Environment, Conservation and Climate Change on 27 April 2023.

Wargari was seconded to the Kokoda Track Authority in an Acting capacity from the Department of Provincial and Local Level Government Affairs to manage Kokoda tourism in November 2018.

He had no commercial business qualifications and no previous experience in tourism, trekking or pilgrimage. He has remained in the role in an Acting capacity for five years. There has been some speculation that his appointment was invalid. It is not known if his appointment was validated by the National Executive Council every three months as is required by the Public Service Act.

The process leading to the revocation took their ineptness to a new level:

- The Minister does not have any legal jurisdiction over the management of the Kokoda Trail – this rests with the Minister for Provincial and Local Level Government Affairs.
- The Acting CEO who advised the Minister’s ‘Kokoda Initiative Committee’ to revoke our license for our alleged non-payment of trek permit fees was paid in full for all our Anzac treks on 15 and 16 April 2023 - his office staff issued receipts for all payments on 17 April 2023. Payment and receipt details are included on this link: [Adventure Kokoda Tour Operators License Update](#).
- The payments were in accordance with the Koiari and Kokoda Track Local-Level Government Trek Permit Laws 2005.
- Sometime during the following 10 days the Acting CEO advised the Minister’s Kokoda Initiative Committee that we had not paid for our trek permit fees despite having possession of the four cheques we presented to him.
- For reasons unknown, the Acting CEO did not present the cheques to the bank for deposit for a further two months – on 13 June 2023.

Adventure Kokoda has filed an injunction against the revocation of its tour operator licence in the National Court.

Summary

When I first trekked Kokoda in 1991 local villagers across the Trail earned zero income as only a small number of Australians trekked across it each year.

Trek groups carried their own dehydrated food and usually engaged a couple of local guides to support them. There was no organization in place to manage it; no fees were payable; and there was no economic benefit for subsistence villagers.

Since then, more than 65,000 Australians from all walks of life have trekked across it.

Our research has revealed they are motivated by the military heritage of the Trail along with the physical and emotional challenge it presents. It is a unique pilgrimage in this regard.

This has generated approximately \$250 million (K570 million) in tourism revenue for PNG airlines, hotels, transport, supermarkets, camping stores, employment of guides and carriers, campsite owners and villages. wages, campsite fees and local services.

Kokoda trek operators have paid more than \$5 million (K12 million) in trek fees to the PNG Kokoda Track (Special Purpose) Authority (KTA).

Philanthropic donations of trekkers personal clothing, boots, medical and school supplies along with camping gear would amount to a further \$5 million (K12 million) in hidden benefits. For example, when trekking began in 1992 none of the guides or carriers owned a pair of boots - today they all have high value trekking boots valued at up to \$450 (K1000) a pair which have been donated to them.

The value of positive publicity for PNG from television documentaries, newspaper articles, and social media reports would be tens of millions of dollars.

However, since Canberra assumed responsibility for the management of the Kokoda Trail via the DFAT-Kokoda Initiative, the PNG Conservation Environment Protection Authority (CEPA), and the Kokoda Track (Special Purpose) Authority in 2009, trekker numbers have fallen by 46%.

This has resulted in a cumulative loss in the region of \$20 million (K46 million) in foregone wages, campsite fees and local purchase for subsistence villagers across the Trail.

The fall in trekker numbers is primarily because the DFAT Kokoda Initiative and CEPA have failed to invest in any military heritage sites to enhance the value of the pilgrimage for international tourists since they assumed responsibility for it in 2009.

They have also failed to introduce any management protocols for Kokoda tourism. The '*law of the jungle*' prevails along the Trail as trek groups have heated clashes over campsites that do not have the capacity to meet demand.

After two decades in charge it is still not possible to book a campsite; there is no trek itinerary management system in place for groups; sections of the Trail remain dangerously unsafe; and there are no toilets which meet the most basic hygiene standards.

Local villagers have been disenfranchised as no micro-business programs have been introduced to assist them to earn additional income by meeting the needs of trekkers.

Covid provided an opportunity for the DFAT-Kokoda Initiative, CEPA and the PNG Tourism Promotion Authority (TPA) to review the reasons behind the rise and fall of Kokoda tourism under their watch since 2009.

The engagement of anthropologists, archaeologists and environmentalists to search for 'objects' across the trail has no relevance to the development of a pilgrimage tourism industry.

The failure to engage an accredited Australian Military Heritage Architect to develop a Military Heritage Master Plan for the Kokoda Trail continues to limit its potential as a World Class pilgrimage tourism destination for international trekkers.

The failure to develop a database of trekkers has severely limited the opportunity to raise a significant amount of money each year for charitable causes along the trail.

The failure to train local villagers to earn additional income from trekkers through the provision of services to meet their needs has deprived them of their rightful share of benefits from Kokoda tourism.

The failure to develop a Trek Itinerary Management System and a Campsite Booking System has limited the income earning opportunities for villagers along the trail as they have no idea who is arriving, or when, and are therefore unable to prepare goods and services to meet their needs and earn additional income..

The failure to protect the welfare of PNG guides and carriers engaged by illegal Kokoda tour operators is a serious breach of the Kokoda Track Authority's 'Duty of Care' towards the people they are supposed to support and trek.

Conclusion

While Port Moresby based landowners argue over the diminishing spoils of Kokoda tourism all other village-based communities across the Kokoda Trail are being denied jobs during the most popular trekking period of the year.

Responsibility for the current situation rests squarely with Canberra funded Kokoda Initiative officials who have used the term ‘Kokoda’ to give relevance to a socio-environment at the expense of our shared military heritage.

They have also failed in their responsibility to ‘*keep the track open, safe and preserved as shared heritage*’ under the provisions of the ‘Joint’ Agreement signed in 2015.

The identification of village-based landowners should have been their most fundamental priority along with the conduct of village-based workshops. Their failure to address these two priority areas has denied traditional village-based landowners a voice in their own affairs and contributed to the current situation.

Villagers also have a sense of isolation from Kokoda tourism as they have never been taught how to earn additional income by providing services to meet the needs of trekkers. They are therefore mere spectators to a passing parade of trekkers. These issues have been well canvassed in the past but ignored.

Canberra officials have also been in denial over the fact that the wartime history of the Kokoda Trail is the major reason Australians choose to trek across it. This is evident in their failure to invest in a single significant military heritage site since they assumed responsibility for its management in 2009.

Their engagement of an American anthropologist without any military service credentials as Australia’s National Military Heritage Advisor, under a recruitment process that could best be described as dodgy, illustrates the contempt they have for the Kokoda campaign. [Our calls for an investigation into the process have been ignored.](#)

Canberra’s priority on environment over pilgrimage tourism is also puzzling given that the Owen Stanley Ranges have not been assessed by the international [Rapid Assessment and Prioritisation of Protected Area Management](#)’ to be under any form of environmental threat.

The PNG Government now has a choice between allowing its most popular tourism destination to continue being managed as an environment park for the benefit of foreign aid-funded officials and consultants or having it managed as a commercial tourism enterprise for the long-term economic benefit of traditional landowner communities.

Recommendations

1. The PNG Government acquire the 20 metre wide, 138 km Kokoda Trail between Owers Corner and Kokoda as gazetted in 1972 as a national tourism asset under the authority of the Land Act 1996 and the Lands Acquisition (Development Purposes) Act 1974.
2. The ‘Kokoda Initiative’ be rebadged as the ‘Owen Stanley Ranges Initiative’ to reflect its focus on environment issues.
3. Canberra accepts the military history of the Kokoda campaign is the major drawcard for Australians who choose to trek across it.
4. Responsibility for oversight of the Kokoda Trail in Canberra be transferred from the Department of Climate Change, Energy, Environment and Water (DCCEEW) to the Department of Veterans Affairs which is responsible for the Australian War Memorial and the Office of Australian War Graves.
5. Responsibility for management of the Kokoda Trail in PNG be transferred from the Minister for Provincial and Local Level Government Affairs and the influence of the Minister for

Environment, Conservation and Climate Change, to the Minister for Tourism, Arts and Culture.

6. [A Joint Agreement for the commemoration of our shared wartime heritage between Australia and PNG](#) be developed with the Department of Veterans Affairs and the PNG Tourism Promotion Authority as the lead agencies.

Link for further information on the author: [Charlie Lynn - Kokoda](#)

Attachment A: Freedom of Information Request

KOKODA TRACK AUTHORITY

[A Special Authority of the Kokoda and Koiari Local-level Governments]

Pt



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Manasupe Zurenuoc
A/Chief Secretary

Kokoda Track Authority Cost Saving Measures

[Deleted]

Actions already Implemented;

[Deleted]

Recouped the majority of 2008 outstanding debts from unpaid trek fees.

[Deleted]

[Deleted]

[Deleted]

[Deleted]

[Deleted]

Rod Hillman
Chief Executive Wednesday,

June 30, 2010

- Chief Executive, Tourism Promotion Authority
- Secretary, Department of Environment & Conservation
- Secretary, Department for National Planning & Monitoring
- First Assistant Secretary Department of Environment, Water, Heritage and the Arts (Australia).

[Deleted]

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

^{iv} <https://www.dcceew.gov.au/parks-heritage/heritage/international-projects/papua-new-guinea>

^v Table 6. Page 39

^{vi} An annual workshop for Port Moresby based landowners should also be considered.

^{vii} Assignment New Guinea. Keith Wiley. Jacaranda Press.1965 P. i