



With permission: Conway Burns

K'gari (Fraser Island)

World Heritage Advisory Committee – Communiqué

8 December 2022

The fourth K'gari World Heritage Advisory Committee (KWHAC) meeting was held on K'gari (Fraser Island) on Thursday, 8 December 2022. KWHAC comprises an independent chair and fifteen members and provides advice to the State and Federal Governments on matters relating to the identification, protection, conservation, presentation and transmission to future generations of the cultural and natural heritage of the K'gari World Heritage Area from a First Nations, Scientific and community perspective.

The meeting followed a celebration on the island on Wednesday, 7 December, marking 30 years since K'gari was inscribed on UNESCO's World Heritage List (1992) and the 50th anniversary of the World Heritage Convention (1972).

Priority Setting for KWHAC

The Committee members discussed and agreed on the priorities for the World Heritage property for 2023-25. These include:

- Advocating for additional funding to support the Best Practice Management of K'gari
- Developing a tenure-blind Strategic Plan for the World Heritage area, including:
 - High-level principles to support the protection, conservation, and transmission of Outstanding Universal Value
 - Monitoring, Evaluation and Review (including visitation data for the property) to meet property and partner needs (including Periodic, Outlook and State of Environment Reporting)
- Finalising and implementing the K'gari Climate Adaptation Plan
- Increasing biosecurity – supporting inspection/surveillance to prevent future pest incursions to K'gari and improving ecosystem resilience.
- Developing and implementing Butchulla Cultural Protocols
- Progressing the K'gari-Great Sandy-Cooloola Extension nomination for natural and cultural criteria (including an assessment of K'gari for cultural values).

Funding for K'gari

The Committee again discussed their concerns about the need for more significant ongoing funding for the property through the Queensland and Commonwealth Governments and the current inequity of World Heritage funding arrangements across Australia.

For example, in October 2022, the Australian Government announced \$24.8 million to continue yellow crazy ant control in the Wet Tropics and \$1.2 billion committed to protecting and restoring the Great Barrier Reef. Yet, the Commonwealth's annual commitment to K'gari is only \$145,000.

K'gari has similar threats to the Wet Tropics. Yellow crazy ants are established on the mainland (nearby in Hervey Bay) and, with a limited Council implementation program and no vehicle inspection points, washdowns or quarantine measures in place for the World Heritage property, could, like myrtle rust, also establish on K'gari. This would be a devastating outcome.

Members reflected that while World Heritage had done much for tourism, increasing visitation to an estimated 500,000 visitors a year, K'gari had continued to deteriorate over 30 years of World Heritage¹. Numbers remain unknown as visitation to the World Heritage area is not monitored.

KWHAC members reiterated the need for increased ongoing funding for the island's management and:

1. Recommend that the Australian Government address the current inequity of funding arrangements. We seek a commitment to increase funding across Australia's World Heritage properties in the new Project Agreement.
2. Support a shared revenue approach (levy) through the Queensland Government to enable greater Butchulla participation in managing the K'gari World Heritage property.
3. We will develop a business plan at our March 2023 meeting with 2-3 costed-out priority activities for the Australian and Queensland Governments' funding consideration.

Marine Debris and Plastic Pollution

Committee members expressed their concerns regarding ongoing and increasing marine debris and plastic pollution being washed onto K'gari and potential impacts to OUV from plastics (and microplastics) being incorporated into K'gari's dune systems (criterion viii), the impacts of plastics and marine debris to the aesthetics of the island (criterion vii) and potential impacts to biological processes (criterion ix), e.g., nesting marine loggerhead turtles, migratory shorebirds, fisheries.

KWHAC urges the Australian Government to increase actions to reduce marine debris and the impacts of plastics and microplastics on K'gari. Members resolved to make a submission to the current House Standing Committee on Climate Change, Energy, Environment and Water [*Inquiry into the impacts of plastic pollution in Australia's oceans and waterways.*](#)

The Committee recommend that all governments take more action to reduce or secure 'floatable items' in flood-prone areas (such as riverbanks) to reduce impacts from plastics (and microplastics).

KWHAC recommends that the Queensland Government and responsible Local Councils act by inspecting pontoons and other regulated maritime infrastructure across SEQ to the Mary River to ensure compliance (e.g., tethered with identification plates on each section) to reduce future impacts to K'gari.

Waste Management on K'gari

Members received a briefing paper on the K'gari Waste Management and Resource Recovery Strategy (led by Fraser Coast Regional Council) and funded through an Australian Heritage Grant. Council also responded to questions on notice from the previous KWHAC meeting regarding the Eurong waste transfer station.

KWHAC members are concerned about the impacts of historical waste that will be capped at Eurong Waste Transfer Station, potential groundwater contamination and the need for the Council to monitor groundwater onsite. KWHAC members were also disturbed about the Council's apparent 'backflip' on plans for Orchid Beach so soon after their *K'gari Waste Management and Resource Recovery Strategy* was adopted. While KWHAC supports a pragmatic approach, it must not risk

further contamination of the World Heritage property. Members support the need for best-practice waste management on the island.

Updates

Updates were provided by the Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water (DCCEEW), the Department of Environment and Science (DES), the Queensland Parks and Wildlife Service (QPWS&P), and Fraser Coast Regional Council (FCRC).

KWHAC members were also provided with an overview of recent research published by committee member Professor Jamie Shulmeister and his colleagues². The research has established the age of K'gari as being older than the Greater Barrier Reef and suggests the reef became established only after the island protected it from the northward drift of sand. The southern limit of the Great Barrier Reef is not a result of the climate being too cool further south. Corals can and do grow hundreds of kilometres further south in Moreton Bay (Brisbane) and Lord Howe Island. The main limiting factor for the southern extent of the reef is the drowning of corals by the rivers of sand going north.

References:

¹ Carter, R.W., Tindale, N., Brooks, P. and Sullivan, D. (2015). Impact of camping on ground and beach flow water quality on the eastern beach of K'gari-Fraser Island: a preliminary study. *Australasian Journal of Environmental Management*, 22(2), pp.216-232.

¹IUCN (2020). Fraser Island - 2020 Conservation Outlook Assessment. IUCN World Heritage Outlook: <https://worldheritageoutlook.iucn.org/>

¹Schlacher, T.A., Richardson, D. and McLean, I. (2008) Impacts of off-road vehicles (ORVs) on Macrobenthic assemblages on sandy beaches. *Environmental Management* 41, pp.878–892.

¹UNESCO, (2000). State of Conservation: K'gari (Fraser Island). Information presented to the Bureau of the World Heritage Committee in 2000. <https://whc.unesco.org/en/soc/3067>

¹Waldron, R. & McCallum, A. (2021). A review of road infrastructure development and contemporary degradation on K'gari-Fraser Island, *Australasian Journal of Environmental Management*, 28:2, 104-125, DOI: [10.1080/14486563.2021.1918586](https://doi.org/10.1080/14486563.2021.1918586)

¹Waldron, R. (2020). Sustainable Transport Strategies and Solutions for K'gari. PhD Thesis, University of the Sunshine Coast.

²Ellerton, D., Rittenour, T.M., Shulmeister, J. et al. 2022. Fraser Island (K'gari) and initiation of the Great Barrier Reef linked by Middle Pleistocene sea-level change. *Nat. Geosci.* 15, 1017–1026 (2022). <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41561-022-01062-6>