



# Healing Foundation

Strong Spirit • Strong Culture • Strong People



## Kaurareg Healing Forum Report

AUGUST 2018

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*The Kaurareg Healing Forum was established through a partnership between The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Healing Foundation and Mura Kosker.*



## The Healing Foundation

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The Healing Foundation is a national Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisation that partners with communities to address the ongoing trauma caused by actions like the forced removal of children from their families. Our work helps people create a different future.

## Mura Kosker Sorority

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Mura Kosker Sorority (MKS) is the peak women's organisation in the Torres Strait Region, protecting and promoting the rights of women, children and families.

We provide programs and services that improve the social, emotional, educational, economic, cultural, spiritual, health and welfare needs of women, children and their dependants.

We are a regional community controlled organisation that provides services premised on human rights, self determination, cultural respect and safety.

*We acknowledge the Kaurereg Leadership and community members who assisted in developing and supporting this healing forum.*



## Introduction

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In May 2012, The Healing Foundation held a healing forum on Horn Island in the Torres Strait. More than 30 participants from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations and communities, including government and non-government agencies, came together to discuss healing needs and start a healing process to address the pain caused by the impact of colonisation in the region.

The forum led to the development of the *ling Sidaun*, a healing gathering, in May 2014. More than 60 community members from across the Torres Straits attended and more than 600 people from across Island communities contributed to the design of the gathering.

It was an opportunity for community members to share their stories, identify causes of disharmony in the community, articulate healing needs and aspirations and suggest ways to achieve their healing objectives.

The input from these two gatherings, along with further consultations across the Islands, informed the development of the *Torres Strait and Kaurareg Aboriginal People's Healing Strategy*, which was launched in 2015. The strategy identified five key areas for healing:

- child safety and wellbeing
- community safety
- spiritual healing
- self determination
- leadership and governance

In 2017, The Healing Foundation formed a partnership with Mura Kosker to further the healing priorities outlined in the strategy, by implementing community healing forums.

Torres Strait communities were invited, through an expression of interest process, to volunteer to host their own healing forum. The successful islands were Kaurareg (Thursday Island), Iama Island and Masig Island. The forums were designed to be a place for interactive and constructive discussion between a diverse range of key stakeholders, including community members, leaders, Elders and representatives of government and non-government agencies.

### **The forums aimed to build:**

- strong community leadership and governance that fosters pride in Torres Strait and Kaurareg Aboriginal People's spirituality and culture
- a self-determined community with the skills, capacity and support to proactively promote and ensure child safety and wellbeing, and broader community safety

### **The objectives of the Torres Strait and Kaurareg Aboriginal People's Community Healing Forums initiative are to:**

- support the community to create and lead healing opportunities
- establish a healing network with champions and leaders who are recognised as the key interface between community and service providers
- empower the community to understand, access and exchange information with services that can support mutually beneficial healing outcomes
- embed healing within government and non-government initiatives already being provided. Importantly, the forums aimed to allow key government departments and local services to learn more about the community's healing solutions and to consider how services can embed healing practices to promote and improve healing outcomes.

This report outlines the key findings from the Kaurareg Healing Forum, which took place on Thursday Island in July 2018. There, 37 people, representing community and agencies, came together to yarn about healing needs and healing solutions.

*We talk of the struggle of growing up in the community and the impact of colonisation. We were taken to TI [Thursday Island] and life was difficult because of colonisation ... people have the experience of having guns held at their chests, and parents having the experience of having their children removed. This has caused Intergenerational Trauma, this pain goes on, causing family division, this is why healing is important, and why we need to sit down together and talk about what it means for us.*



## Key findings

*We can't have strong identity without our language and our culture ... we need to unite as Kaurareg elders to create this and grow the flame ... we need to make sure that our children and young people are taught this within the education system ... we need to ensure that this is supported.*

### **What has changed since the 2012 forum?**

In setting the context for the forum, participants were asked to reflect on both previous healing forums and the *Torres Strait and Kaurareg Aboriginal People's Healing Strategy*. Participants were asked to reflect on the degree to which these processes and report had helped to address the issues raised at that time and reflect on any changes that had occurred as a result.

Participants noted that at the time, the forum had generated hope for change. However, many participants at the current forum had not seen the report and suggested it had not driven change. Many issues raised in 2012 were reported as having remained the same:

*Our 2012 report ... we wanted to create change ... everything is still the same as in the 2012 report. Nothing has changed.*

*All the issues that were in the 2012 report are still the same, if not worse. This says that all the people who are meant to be listening are not listening.*

*We can't have it [this forum] be like the 2012 report and have it sit on the shelf and have no one care.*

Forum participants still felt that the key themes that were outlined in both the report and strategy were still relevant and important to them. As a result, the forum revisited these themes in working groups to identify issues and highlight critical solutions that participants believed would create change. This included identifying current initiatives that could be built on.

## **Issues causing disharmony**

### **Fragmented community**

Kaurareg participants remained concerned that their communities were not working together. Communities and families reported that divisions were holding communities back from becoming strong and empowered in decision making processes. Participants expressed a desire to meet together more often to discuss family and community issues, such as took place in previous times before communities were separated:

*We only meet on special occasions or at events ... we rarely have meetings. There is no time to catch up personally as we have to go back to work or school and on separate islands until the next event, but this is not enough.*

*In old days we used to sit down have kai kai in front of fire and talk in the dark ... but that doesn't happen now.*

*Some families still stay away because of too much tension between families ... we can't keep going on like this, we have to become one.*

*Coming here sitting talking is a start ... we need more regular meetings with families because there's not enough time at events ... Families need to be here to make decisions because it's causing more divisions when they're not.*

*Back in old days we were one, but Administration separated us ... now we have to go to work and school in different places.*

### **Loss of culture and identity**

As reported in 2012, loss of culture and identity is having negative effects on communities. There is a loss of identity for the Kaurareg people and communities due to the forced movement of people and families. Participants reported that the Kaurareg nation has and is still not recognised nationally. While Native Title was secured over some islands in 2001, Elders continue in their fight to secure their 'rightful connection and belonging' to the remaining islands within their homelands. Access has been denied to land where the Kaurareg people have spiritual ties, opportunities to speak their traditional language, and opportunities to practice traditional forms of culture (such as ceremonial dance, hunting for bush tucker, spiritual healing and using traditional medicines).

The result has been loss of language, traditions, customs and stories:

*When our families tried to come back there were other Thursday Islanders living on our islands ... when we came back we were not allowed to speak our language and practice our culture and we were prevented from practicing our ceremony.*

*We want to reclaim our language. We have our own culture, our own ways. We are currently speaking western island language ... this is not our way.*

Also, as reported in 2012, communities are concerned by the impact of technology and social media on culture and identity, particularly for younger people:

*Social media is a big problem and gets used in the wrong way to breach cultural protocols.*

*Social media is having a big impact on our communities – it is rivalling our cultural ways of doing business.*

*Young people use phones and forget about respecting Elders.*

### **Generational gap**

The generational gap reported in 2012 was again noted in this forum. That is, young people no longer respect Elders. This was reported as being due to the influence of modern culture and the effects of colonisation, where young people have witnessed and been subjected to the effects of addictions and abuse in older generations. Relationships break down because of this and young people do not feel safe or have positive role models:

*Generational gap is still an issue. We have had a look at our past but we need to look at our solutions to create a better future for ourselves and a new generation.*

*We need to work together to solve our generational gap. We need to strengthen our ties to support each other [young and older members of communities].*



### **Drug and alcohol/gambling**

The negative impacts of drug and alcohol misuse and gambling also have not changed since 2012. They continue to cause worry and distress for community members and continue to be the cause of trauma, grief and loss for communities. The links to family violence, financial problems, family breakdown and poor health were noted:

*People who have drug and alcohol and gambling problems aren't honest to themselves [or their] families and friends ... and there is a loss of income, house, family ...*

*Gambling still contributes to financial stresses [and also places] financial stress on grandparents, as they feel obliged to provide for the children.*

*Gambling is creating a burden on our grandparents and creating a stress on them to have to support their grandchildren.*

### **Schooling and education**

The challenges facing young people within the education system and schooling generally were highlighted much more strongly in this forum than the 2012 forum. Participants were concerned that in the education system there was too little focus on the language and culture of the Kaurareg nation. Schools were therefore contributing to the loss of language and culture:

*We need Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander history taught in our schools. We need to grow our story together.*

*Our children are still being bullied in school. We need action in the schools on this. We have to teach our children that this is an Island school where we respect each other. I do not think our non-Indigenous teachers are paying enough attention to this and we are importing attitudes we do not want.*





### ***Government policies and practice***

In 2012, there was discussion about government systems and legislation causing community disharmony and imbalance. This time communities reported that there was a level of disengagement from government departments with the Kaurareg nation and that government agencies were not listening to, or responding to, community concerns:

*Government need to come to Kaurareg and align their plans with Kaurareg people.*

*We have very few government agencies [present or visiting]. To form a partnership we need the Commonwealth and State to sit down and talk ... we need to make this happen.*

*We need to work out how this fits in with the federal government and state, if we can with all of these issues, and how we line it up with the political reality.*

*If government was fair dinkum they would have listened to this report.*

Participants also reported that communities needed to be less reliant on government support. Through strong leadership and good governance practices, communities suggested they can achieve more sustainable and effective outcomes but need partnerships in place with government agencies.

### ***Apologies, forgiveness and reconciliation***

There was more discussion in this forum about the impacts of trauma caused by government and church practices than in the 2012 forum. This occurred through yarning and conversations about issues and community disharmony, where participants strongly stated the need for an apology. Participants described how without progress towards forgiveness and reconciliation, communities would continue to struggle with the effects of trauma:

*Apology from the churches to the Kaurareg nation is needed to promote healing.*

*We need to sit down with the relevant people and hear them apologise to us.*

*We need an apology and recognition of the past hurts caused to the Kaurareg people ... from both government and church. This is part of the reconciliation process. This would be a good start.*

*We want a healthy and unified environment and we need to work towards forgiveness ... we must work towards forgiving each other.*



## Actions for healing

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The following are the strategies, actions and healing solutions participants identified to address community disharmony and distress. Many are similar to those developed in 2012 but most importantly, participants want action and partnerships with others in order to carry out these activities. They want to ensure this report does not 'sit on a shelf and get forgotten', as the previous report did.

### *Investment in healing*

Participants noted that first and foremost the Kaurareg nation and people need healing. The impacts of colonisation were strongly expressed through the experiences and stories shared and healing was seen as critical to achieving positive community outcomes. These require long term investment to match the long term impacts of colonisation. Communities suggested that there 'needs to be more focus and more resources committed to healing'. Healing needs to be supported with funding but the practice must also be based in the cultural knowledge and traditions of the Kaurareg people. Cultural healing practices should be driven by families and include activities on country ('cultural places'), including songs, language and stories as well as gatherings for Kaurareg and Ilan families.

### *Recognition for the Kaurareg people/nation*

Formal recognition of the Kaurareg people and nation was reported as a mechanism to enhance and strengthen people and communities' healing journey:

*We firstly need respect, recognition and acceptance of Kaurareg people and acknowledgement of our existence, our cultural values and cultural lore.*

Participants reported the need for a forum with all stakeholders to work out how agencies and government departments can recognise and respond to Kaurareg people. These conversations then need to translate into policy to 'ensure that Kaurareg is recognised and included'. Further, agencies need to develop ways to acknowledge, recognise and respect traditional owners and their sacred sites and stories and then embed such recognition into policy.

Participants at the healing forum want an apology from the agencies, churches and courts that were part of the policies of removal and that have caused trauma and distress for the Kaurareg nation. This was deemed a necessary first step to the healing and reconciliation process.

### *Youth focused initiatives*

As noted, the forum gave particular attention to improving outcomes for young people. Participants suggested there was a need for more youth healing programs. Youth gatherings that focused on issues affecting young people are necessary to strengthen cultural ways, as well as young people's understanding of their roles and responsibilities.

There is also a need for a greater focus in the education system on the language and culture of the Kaurareg nation and to ensure that Torres Strait and Aboriginal history is taught. Participants wanted to work towards having an Indigenous principal in their schools in the long term. This is one way for communities to have more control of 'who and what is coming into our schools and our communities'. People in schools who are not from the Torres Strait must have cultural awareness and understanding that they are living on Kaurareg land: 'They need to know and respect local protocols'.

### *Stronger families and communities*

Communities want to build up families and make them stronger. This can be done by planning family camps and time together that helps to maintain culture and language. Communities suggested they need to work with families to set goals and work towards collective actions and accountability.

Further actions to support families include finding a way for people to use their welfare payments to ensure 'they can keep food in their belly and a roof over their heads' rather than spending money on gambling, alcohol and drugs. Strategies need to be in place to help families manage their finances effectively. It was suggested that Mura Kosker might be able to help communities achieve this.

Communities reported the need to develop strategies that support economic growth and participation that promotes independence for communities:

*We need to find ways to make money to create our own services and not be reliant on government. With money, we can create control and find a way for us to have self determination.*

*[We] need to find new ways where we can use our profit to build houses and infrastructure for each other and create our own stability. We need to use our technology to share our cultural knowledge and also our good news stories – without this we are left defined by only what people know.*

Participants reported that strong families and communities will be built by communities themselves, through a process of self determination and empowerment that replaces existing processes of disempowerment that, in turn, lead to loss of cultural identity.

### **Governance and leadership**

Leading from the previous two themes, discussions about government policies and engagement focused on the ways communities could take more control of their own affairs and be empowered in the decisions that affect them.

Participants reported that Kaurareg leadership and cultural governance need to be strengthened, prior to going to, or engaging with, government: 'We need to ensure we have a strong governance framework'. To do this, leaders need to come together to heal and unite. The forum reported that there needs to be additional investment in Kaurareg leadership. There needs to be a network of Kaurareg Elders within the Public Body Corporate (PBC) that will grow community ownership. Increased cultural governance in community organisations should include lore and law together with accountability built into local decision making.

Communities want leaders from the Kaurareg nation to support people being educated in the needs of the Kaurareg people. This can occur through more regular meetings and by strengthening kinship structures to enable young people to assume, and transition into, leadership that maintains strong cultural values.

## **Priority actions**

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The healing forum identified six priority areas for action moving forward to ensure the forum and report lead to improvements.

### **1. Increasing respect, recognition and acceptance of Kaurareg existence, cultural values and lore through:**

- local media and storytelling
- women's organisations and groups that support acknowledgement and respect
- gatherings for sharing historical and cultural knowledge
- youth forums on how to show apasin/mina pawa – Respect Appropriate Way
- empowerment for Ngalpun Lagau danalaig – Our Way of Life

### **2. Enhancing cultural identity by:**

- incorporating local story and knowledge within schools
- holding family camps and outings
- revitalising and maintaining language
- building survival skills through bush tucker and bush medicine

### **3. Creating stronger relationships with government and NGO's by:**

- increasing options for housing and providing better health services and funding partnerships
- building cultural awareness in services and agencies (black card training)
- running tours into services to build familiarity and cultural safety

#### 4. Increasing co-existence with others by:

- increasing cultural experiences across a multicultural society
- feasting and sharing food across groups and communities
- finding ways to celebrate the diversity of communities

#### 5. Improving technology and digital solutions by:

- embedding the STEAM – Science, Technology, Engineering, the Arts and Mathematics – initiative
- establishing a Kaurareg information hub
- sharing stories and histories through social media increasing and advancing cultural knowledge through medicine, hunting and survival

#### 6. Establishing groups that strengthen families by:

- establishing a mums and bubs group
- establishing an Elders/leaders group
- hosting gatherings that strengthen cultural and spiritual practice



## Next steps

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1. It is recommended that a Torres Strait stakeholder forum is held with leadership from the federal, state and local governments and Kaurareg Leadership from across the region, to develop an action plan to implement the solutions highlighted in this report
2. The Kaurareg leadership will utilise this report as a means to advance their solutions in discussions with both state and federal politicians.



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