

# HealingFoundation

Strong Spirit • Strong Culture • Strong People



**KAURAREG REPORT**

**NOVEMBER 2012**

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## Introduction

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The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Healing Foundations held its second healing forum on Horn Island in the Torres Strait on 24 May 2012.

There were 30 participants from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations and communities, including government and non-government agencies. The healing forum was an opportunity for representatives of the Kaurareg Nation and the Torres Strait Islands to come together. During the forum participants were able to define healing, discuss their healing needs and start a healing process to deal with the pain caused by the impact of colonisation in their region.

Participants identified the causes of disharmony in the community, articulated healing needs and aspirations and suggested ways to restore the balance.

### This report contains:

- key messages
- recommendations
- The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Healing Foundation response.



## Who we are

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Following the Apology to Australia's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in 2008, \$26.6 million was provided in the 2009–10 Budget to establish an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander healing foundation to address the profound legacy of pain and hurt in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's lives caused by past government policies.

From May to August 2009 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people around Australia were consulted on the structure and role of the healing foundation. As a result, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Healing Foundation was established as a national independent organisation on 30 October 2009.

The Healing Foundation is governed by an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander board, whose members have strong connections to community and provide a dynamic mix of experience. The board includes members of the Stolen Generations and people working in the areas of youth affairs, health, justice, healing and trauma.

**The Healing Foundation is improving the wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people by:**

- developing the healing story through funding healing programs
- raising the profile and documenting the importance of culturally strong healing programs through research and evaluation
- building the capacity and leadership of communities and workers to deal with trauma through training and education.





## The forum

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The Kaurareg Aboriginal people come from the 'inner islands' located off the tip of Cape York Peninsula in Queensland. They are seafaring people, who for thousands of years used outrigger canoes and other watercraft to navigate their homelands.

In March 1922, they were removed at gunpoint from their traditional homelands and forced to survive in cultural, social, political and economic environments that in their experience were not truly respectful, dignified, fair or favourable. Despite this hardship, their Elders remained dignified and focused in their fight to re-establish their rightful connection and belonging to their island homelands.

As a result, the Kaurareg people were able to secure Native Title rights on 23 May 2001 over most of *Ngurupai* (Horn Island), *Murulag* (Prince of Wales Island), *Zuna* (Entrance Island), *Tarilag* (Packer Island), *Yeta* (Port Lihou Island), *Damaralag* (Damarlag Islet) and *Mipa* (Pipa Islet also known as Turtle Island). The Elders of today continue in their fight to secure our rightful connection and belonging to the remaining islands within our homelands.

To date there has been little engagement with the broader Torres Strait Islander community about the impact of this history and what this has meant for the Kaurareg people and the Torres Strait Island community. The Kaurareg and Torres Strait communities have always cohabited and have strong interfamilial cultural ties.

The healing forum was seen as an opportunity to begin healing the past and moving towards a more positive future. For many Kaurareg people and Torres Strait Island community members this was seen as a significant first step. For many participants it was important to use local relationships and move forward as a group.

The purpose of the Kaurareg healing forum was to hear and document the healing needs and aspirations of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community and to build the story of healing in the Torres Strait. Most participants were community members.

### Forum participants examined the following two questions about healing in the community:

- What are the issues causing disharmony and imbalance?
- What will it take to restore balance?

The forum also gave the Healing Foundation the opportunity to engage with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community. By hearing and documenting the story of healing, the Healing Foundation will ensure that community aspirations genuinely inform healing work at the national level.

## OUR PRIORITIES

Our initial priorities were shaped by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community healing program representatives from throughout Australia at the first national healing gathering, Let's Talk Healing, in June 2010.

### These priorities include:

- defining what healing means to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people
- acknowledging the intergenerational impact of trauma on families and communities
- developing links between Indigenous and non-Indigenous healing models
- working with young people, building strong spirits and connections to culture
- supporting Stolen Generations survivors
- developing programs relevant to men and boys
- building on the work women have done to unite and heal families and communities.



## Key messages

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Forum participants formed talking circles to identify key issues and solutions for their healing. The following are the key messages identified at the forum.

### Issues causing disharmony and imbalance in our community

- **Fragmented community including cultural egotism and self-interest**

Participants spoke about their distress at how communities are not working together anymore. Many people expressed a belief that community members are only interested in themselves and are not concerned with what is going on in the wider community. For many there was sadness that individuals appeared to have no interest in coming together to solve issues that affect everyone in the community. This makes it very hard to work as a community and resolve problems.

- **Loss of culture and identity**

Participants expressed how challenging it is to be able to maintain culture and identity in an ever-changing modern world. This has significantly affected communities, particularly the younger generation dealing with the changes and influences of the new world. Historically, racist policies were deliberately put in place to 'break down culture'. This denied people access to their land where they had spiritual ties, opportunities to speak their traditional language and practise traditional forms of culture, such as ceremonial dance, hunting for bush tucker, spiritual healing and using traditional medicines. Modern processes and technology have also created new challenges.

- **Disempowerment leading to low self-esteem**

Community members expressed how people often feel powerless and unable to take control of their own lives. For many this was related to government policies that removed control from people and led to community members feeling hopeless. Traditionally, each person had a role in the community and each role had value and purpose for the day-to-day functioning of the community. Over time, with the breakdown of culture, traditional roles have been taken from our people, which in the minds of many participants was the cause of a lot of dysfunction in communities.

- **Government systems including legislation**

The systems of government and ever-changing legislation affect people's lives daily in this region. Participants expressed that they don't feel like they can 'have a say' or 'speak their minds'. They expressed frustration that at times the government did not appear to understand their lives or needs. Participants spoke of needing to have their own system in place with trusted representatives from communities who they can rely on to advocate and speak on their behalf. For the Kaurareg Nation this needed to be a person or people they had faith in, otherwise there was fear that nothing would change.

- **Generational gap**

Many community members expressed concern that in today's world the generational gap has become unhealthy. Young people no longer appear to respect Elders. This may be due to some influences of modern culture; however, participants noted that the relationship with Elders and young people had also been affected by colonisation. Participants commented on how young people have had to witness and be subject to the effects of addictions and abuse from older generations. This has led many young people to implement ways to keep themselves safe. This has also been the cause of the breakdown in relationships and lack of respect for Elders. Community members spoke of the importance of young people needing to feel safe and supported with positive role models to help and guide them.

- **Drug and alcohol misuse**

Participants spoke about how the effects of drug and alcohol misuse in their communities have been catastrophic. This misuse has affected most families in the region. It has caused many problems including abusive behaviour to family and community members, including domestic violence, sexual abuse, financial problems, poor health and early death. This has resulted in much trauma, grief and loss for communities.



- **Cultural prejudice**

Kaurareg Aboriginal people have suffered cultural prejudice from the wider community but also within the local community. Historically they are a nation of people dispossessed of their traditional lands, culture and language. There has been little acknowledgment of the Kaurareg Aboriginal people from the people who settled on their traditional lands. This has caused immense tension, anger and hurt and people feel they are still fighting for the appropriate recognition.

- **Gambling**

Participants outlined how addictive behaviour continues to be very destructive in communities. Gambling causes many problems. It affects daily living in cases where there is not enough money for basic things such as rent, food, utilities, clothes and education. This puts pressure on families and can result in fighting and violence among family and community members.



*We need to bring these issues back to the community – we must work to preserve the oneness of our culture.*

## **Restoring harmony and balance**

- **Respect, caring and sharing, upholding traditional values**

Participants in the forum strongly expressed the need to reclaim their traditional values, feeling that people seemed to have lost this. Forum participants felt that when they respected and cared for each other the old way, they lived more harmoniously. Community members felt that there needed to be processes reinstated that would enable caring, sharing and respect to counteract the individualism that was taking root in their community.

- **Reconnecting to our cultural strength**

Participants felt that reconnection to their cultural strength would help families create healthy identities. Maintaining cultural law and building cultural strength through ceremony, song, dance, language, beliefs and values were seen as key ways to achieve this.



*Bringing cultural practice back and educating our young people – if this happens they will understand, they will not get lost, they will start to know both sides. Cultural ceremony keeps our children strong.*

- **Cultural healing**

For many participants there was a strong need to reclaim the ancient wisdom that had helped people deal with trauma over many centuries and that would be essential for families and communities now. Land was a means to care for both the spirit and the body, and being able to undertake healing processes on, and supported by, country was seen as critical to change.

- **Undertaking education on our own cultural ways including in schools**

Participants felt that children were at risk of losing their culture and that one way to counteract this was for it to be valued and taught in the school curriculum. For the Kaurareg people this was especially important as a means of maintaining their culture for future generations. It was felt that Elders and other role models in the community could teach in the schools. Participants expressed that this teaching gave respect to cultural ways and helped young people map their family and cultural connections.



• **Rebuilding our relationships and celebrating our diversity**

Community members recognised the significant diversity within which they lived. They felt there needed to be more opportunities for community members to share their knowledge and to join together in addressing many of the issues they faced. This included having respect for the diverse region they lived in and ensuring that all processes respected this. The chance for the Kaurareg people to participate and dance at the coming opening of the cultural centre was cited as a good example of how to do this.

• **Community ownership and responsibility**

Participants in the forum felt that one of the ways to counteract the helplessness and hopelessness in communities was to develop processes that supported people to take back control of their lives. This meant that deep engagement was needed with community members and that government and non-government services had to ensure processes that enabled this. Participants felt that better cultural orientation was needed in workplaces and the establishment of cultural protocols to assist in this.



*We must have community ownership or it will never get healed – this is not about the government it is about us.*

• **Increased youth support initiatives**

Participants agreed that we should work with the wider community to support Indigenous and non-Indigenous youths, as our youth are our future. Indigenous youth should feel comfortable accessing and using resources in mainstream services and should establish and make networks that are useful and respect their cultural values. Participants felt that to address the problems in their community, ‘youth positive’ interventions were needed to empower the young and to strengthen their identity so they feel proud of who they are. The focus was on establishing a youth council. Community members felt that this would increase programs to support their youth. It was important for the participants that these programs should be community driven, positive and culturally appropriate.

• **Developing our own future groups to support cultural lore and law integrity**

Participants felt that to restore harmony and balance in their communities they needed to reinvest and support their cultural lore and law integrity. Establishing a community justice advisory committee to work in partnership with the local police and the courts was seen as a means to achieve this. Participants in the forum spoke of the need for the community to be more actively involved in building the safety of their people. They linked this to the need for a strengthened tribal council where men’s and women’s business was supported and respected.

• **Develop our leadership**

Participants outlined that for harmony to be restored they needed to develop good strong leadership in communities. Strong leadership was seen as central to helping people reconnect to the ancient values of caring, sharing and respect. This was seen as an important way of ensuring that these values could be accessed and instilled in the younger generation. It was felt that community leadership needed to be nurtured by both Elders and young people. Participants saw this as vital for helping young people grow into future leaders. Mentoring programs for young people were seen as a way to ensure important leadership skills were passed on. It was felt that this would break the cycle of what many called the ‘look after ourselves culture’. Many people spoke about the importance of sharing knowledge and skills as had been done in the old days and that this would restore balance to the community.







Figure 1: Issues causing disharmony and imbalance

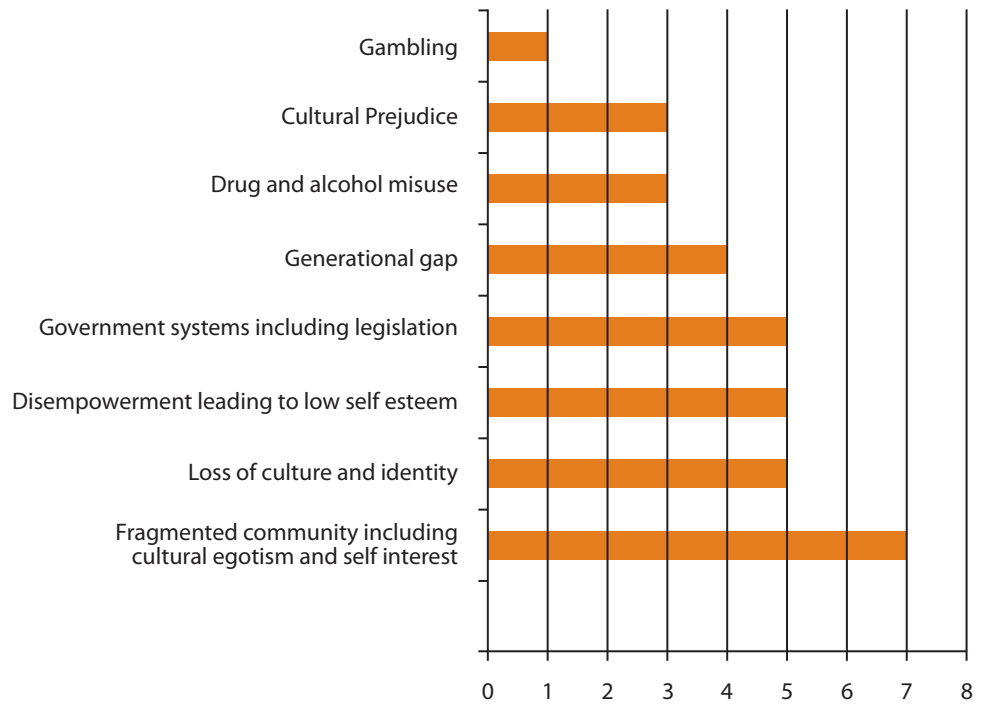


Figure 2: Restoring harmony and balance



## Recommendations

The forum identified the following recommendations to help the Kaurareg community meet its healing goals.

### Integrated healing services – healing programs

The Kaurareg healing forum identified the need for holistic healing programs focused on the whole community, from Elders through to young people. The forum recognised that throughout the years there had been much pain and hurt experienced by all generations and that healing programs could provide the community with the strength to reconnect to their culture, values and traditions.

Community members discussed that without healing programs there was nowhere for them to turn when in pain. There was increased risk of them turning on each other, which in turn caused breakdowns in their culture, families and communities. Culturally appropriate healing programs with services that provided a safe and respectful space for yarning circles or individual counselling were seen as vital to community wellbeing.

### Youth healing programs

The participants felt there was a specific need for healing programs for their young people. Many participants felt that young people were struggling in today's society with the complexity of living in both worlds. Participants felt specific youth healing programs would strengthen their youth and help them to feel connected to their culture and communities. Participants felt that healing programs would give young people a platform and a voice so that they felt empowered to speak their minds and talk about issues affecting them.

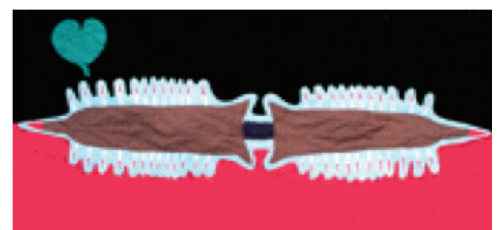
Participants identified that, like many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities around Australia, their young people had been affected by intergenerational trauma. People felt that this trauma had affected their youth and resulted in destructive behaviours such as substance abuse, violence, crime and imprisonment, and poor physical and mental health. These behaviours were seen to negatively affect young people's ability to thrive in education, obtain employment and engage and participate fully in society.

Youth healing programs were seen as a way of healing these deep wounds and ensuring a more positive future for young people in the community.

### Investing in Kaurareg cultural leadership and governance

Strong leadership and governance were seen as essential for sustainable and effective outcomes for the Kaurareg community. Enabling the Kaurareg people to exercise their rights and responsibilities in developing a healing agenda for their community is vital to wellbeing. Building specific responses that take into account the unique history and experiences of the Kaurareg people can only be achieved through building their voice in the design, development and delivery of services.

The first Kaurareg strategic plan has enabled this and work should progress on the implementation of this plan. Significant evidence has emerged from Michael Chandler's research that links self-determination with increased wellbeing outcomes including suicide reduction.





## Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Healing Foundation response

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The Healing Foundation recognises the work of the Australian Government and the Queensland Government in addressing many of the issues of disharmony identified in this report. This includes significant investment of funds in a number of areas including housing, alcohol and drug treatment services and family support. Our hope is that the material contained in this report will continue to assist policy development that meets the aspirations of Aboriginal people in the Torres Strait and surrounds.

### Intergenerational Trauma Initiative

In July 2011, the Healing Foundation announced a funding initiative aimed at acknowledging and addressing the devastating impact intergenerational trauma has had on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people.

The Healing Foundation recognises that our young people are hurting. They have been witness to, and experienced first-hand, the trauma that past government policies have had on their families and communities. Many of our young people display their own hurt through negative behaviours including drug and alcohol use, self-harm and failing to reach their full potential.

The intergenerational trauma projects aim to help Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people heal from their distress and prevent the continuing transmission of trauma through future generations. The projects assist the wellbeing of young people and families in a holistic way, including supporting young people to build skills in managing grief and loss and forming positive connections to their culture.

The project sites were selected through a scoping process, which included ascertaining what programs were currently funded by state and federal governments and an analysis of data related to trauma indicators such as child protection and juvenile justice statistics. In late 2011, the Healing Foundation awarded funds to three Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander controlled organisations in Brisbane, Darwin and Kununurra. The distribution of projected sites ensured representation across urban, regional and remote Australia. Funds of \$1.5 million over two years were allocated to support the projects.

As part of our commitment to building programs from an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander worldview, we have invested significant time, energy and resources in the planning and development phase of the initiatives. We are working closely with the funded organisations to develop service-specific program logics for each of the three sites. All three pilot projects are working to achieve common goals – improved wellbeing of children and young people, strengthened family relationships and an integrated service system. Each project is designed to meet the unique challenges young people and families face and the cultural context in which they live.

#### **A range of project activities will be delivered over the life of the initiatives, including:**

- healing camps for young people and families
- healing circles
- use of country to support increased cultural connection
- outreach support for young people and families
- revitalisation of ceremony and cultural activities
- mentoring and personal development programs for young people
- participation in employment and education programs
- counselling and therapeutic support for young people and families.

Staff employed to work on the pilot projects will receive training, building the skills to provide appropriate healing activities. Sites will come together to share what they have learnt and collectively solve problems and challenges.

**A thorough evaluation of the pilot programs will be undertaken to:**

- contribute to the evidence base for an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander framework for youth-focused healing projects
- increase and share the understanding of the cultural and social worth of healing projects among the wider community and professionals supporting children, young people and families experiencing trauma
- increase the sustainability of the projects by demonstrating the need for, and value of, such projects when sourcing ongoing funds.

The Healing Foundation looks forward to sharing the outcomes of these projects as we build our knowledge base of what works in healing for our children and young people.

**Development of Torres Strait strategy**

The Healing Foundation recognises that the Torres Strait is a unique place with its own experience of colonisation. Therefore, a specific response is required from the Healing Foundation that takes into account the unique environment and displacement. The Healing Foundation will try to continue to partner with key agencies such as the Department of Aboriginal Affairs and the Torres Strait Regional Authority to build on work already being done in the region.

The Healing Foundation has committed to the development of a Torres Strait healing strategy. We will be working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities in the Torres Strait to develop this strategy to ensure that it meets community needs and provides appropriate responses for Aboriginal and Torres Strait members resident in the region and throughout Australia.

**Healing centres**

The development of healing centres or healing hubs is emerging as one approach to addressing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community healing.

The Healing Foundation currently funds the preliminary development of three separate healing centres, and is aware of a number of others in development or being considered.

Designing and developing a healing centre is a significant piece of work. To support this emerging practice, dedicated time and resources are needed to document the model's theoretical design, come up with an appropriate staffing structure and to incorporate current findings. Many of these projects have not been able to move to a more comprehensive design and development phase due to a lack of dedicated resources.

The Healing Foundation has commissioned a program design consultancy to support the development of healing centres that are informed by research evidence and have clearly documented program structure and program logic. This will provide concrete models for investment and implementation, as well as support for emerging healing centres.

**This program design consultancy will have the following key outcomes:**

- investigation of innovative and best practice models, both globally and in Australia, to support the development of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander healing centres
- identification of options for funding the development of healing centres
- development of program logic for healing centres informed by theory and research
- indicative costings and staged development plans for healing centres.

We anticipate that this work will be concluded by November 2012 and will be made available to communities across Australia to assist them in this work.



