



**HealingFoundation**

Strong Spirit • Strong Culture • Strong People



# Masig Healing Forum Report

SEPTEMBER 2018

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*The Masig Healing Forum was established through a partnership between The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander 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.

*'The gathering to me is as important as the first conference  
of Torres Strait Councilors on August 23rd 1937.'*



## 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.

This was followed by The Healing Foundation's Torres Strait Healing Gathering, Iling Sidaun, 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 in the lead up to the gathering.

Iling Sidaun was an opportunity for community members to share their stories, identify the 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 significant further consultation 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 across three Island communities at a local level.

Torres Strait communities were invited, through an expression of interest process, to nominate to host their own healing forum. The successful islands were Kaurareg (Thursday Island), Iama Island and Masig Island. The forums were a place for constructive dialogue 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 forums were 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

This report outlines the key findings from the Masig Healing Forum that took place on Masig Island on 31 July 2018). There, 43 people representing community and agencies came together to talk about healing needs and solutions.



## Setting the scene for culturally safe yarning

Creating a culturally safe space for yarning and conversations is a critical element of healing forums. This can be done through cultural ceremony, cultural performances, acknowledgments and Welcomes to Country.

In Masig, community members sung Inabi Wakai Yuddan, a welcome hymn in language, which provided a spiritual welcome. Frank Cook, The Healing Foundation project lead, led participants in a Sibwanan/Omar ceremony. This was the first time the ceremony had been performed on Masig Island in more than 100 years. It is an old ceremony that was customary in the Torres Strait for when Island communities sought permission to enter other communities. It had been eroded by the fact that when colonised, Torres Strait communities had to seek permission for implementation of their customary ways. The healing forum was an important opportunity to reinstate a cultural ceremony that returned power to Elders and allowed the community to renew an important tradition.

The ceremony began with the laying down of a mat, as a place for meeting, and the exchange of gifts. This provided permission to The Healing Foundation, from the Elders, to 'come and work amongst us'. It formally welcomed those from outside the community to come and visit and/or work with the community and recognised them as friends who were no longer strangers.

All participants were accorded permission to be in the community and to receive protection from the Elders, and with this a culturally safe environment was secured. The forum formally commenced with introductions from representatives of Mura Kosker and The Healing Foundation:

*We have time to talk now ... I feel protected by the Elders while here ... we know what happened in the past and we need healing to move forward. We want our families to have a safe strong future.*

Prior to the discussions taking place, Yessie Mosby set the scene by highlighting what healing means in a local context for the Masig community, noting that the trauma resulting from colonisation, including massacres, had encoded trauma in the bloodline and spirit of the community:

*We must talk about trauma because the outcomes are in our bloodlines ... it's in the spirit ... massacres are in everyone's bloodlines and there is still no compensation or royalties.*

For healing to take place, wounds need to heal and this requires apologies, forgiveness and then reconciliation. To do this truth needs to be told, acknowledged and accepted.





## Key findings

*When it comes to healing these are the things we need ... forgiveness and reconciliation.*

At the commencement of the healing forum participants were asked for their reflections on the *Torres Strait and Kaurareg Aboriginal People's Healing Strategy* and the degree to which they had found it useful.

Across the whole group, there were few people who had seen the document and therefore it had not – until this point – assisted people to heal on Masig Island. However, as people looked through the strategy they acknowledged the importance of the five areas of healing – child safety and wellbeing, community safety, spiritual healing, self-determination and leadership and governance – and their ongoing relevance to the community.

Importantly, Elders noted that the *Torres Strait and Kaurareg Aboriginal People's Healing Strategy* seemed complex and distant to them, and it had too many words. Elders felt they could not see themselves in the document, which felt like a mainstream government document:

*I don't know that report and hardly any action has taken place since that time and all the issues are still important ... the Elders are saying they cannot see themselves in that healing strategy.*

*The healing strategy is language a bit over our heads ... it feels western not community, so it does not feel like ours and so we cannot own it.*

Key reflections on the strategy continued as the healing forum progressed, forming the basis for many discussions. They are included in the following sections of this report.



## **Issues causing disharmony and distress**

Community members discussed the issues that were causing disharmony and distress in their families and communities across two yarning circles. Healing forum participants then identified 10 issues that were common to both groups and therefore seen as the most pressing for Masig Island. Once they had been named, there was less discussion about the actual issues, with the focus moving towards solutions.

### **a Cultural protocols and practices**

Disconnection from family, culture, country, kinship, language and cultural practices was a key source of distress for the community. Young and old people were reported as being disconnected from each other and young people were generally not engaging with cultural practices:

*We need interaction between groups like Elders and young people sharing knowledge and we give the young people the opportunity to practice their knowledge and culture.*

People reported that the tension that exists between lore and law needs to be understood, and a lack of understanding and respect for local cultural protocols was also identified. Agencies do not understand local protocols and cultural traditions and therefore mainstream systems and services are not sensitive to local cultures and practices.

The loss of local languages and the need for language maintenance programs was also distressing for the community:

*What is culture? ... A clear understanding is needed in order to practice culture. We need to identify the things that make culture and understand how it works and how it operates and what makes it move ... what is our true understanding on that?*

### **b Domestic and family violence**

Community members are still concerned – as they were at the time of the *Torres Strait and Kaurareg Aboriginal People's Healing Strategy* – about the level of domestic and family violence in the community, as well as issues relating to child neglect and abuse. Communities noted that both victims and perpetrators of violence carry trauma caused by the processes of colonisation. These have left them disconnected from country and culture. As noted previously, Mura Kosker was seen as the lead agency but needed more resources 'to do more good work' with both victims and perpetrators, and women, men and families.

### **c Young people**

The community is concerned about its young people. The healing forum reported that young people are largely disconnected from their culture and generally do not attend cultural meetings. There are issues with alcohol and substance abuse and poor education outcomes. Through to Year 6, children are poorly prepared for leaving the community to go to senior school and often return even more disconnected from their community, culture and family. Poor outcomes for young people were generally reported as being the result of Intergenerational Trauma:

*Don't blame ourselves for our children mucking up. It's the trauma ... an intergenerational curse.*

*The children do not know what happened and maybe if parents had spoken it out it might have been better. Trauma needs truth and parents speaking it to children but departments need to speak it and acknowledge it too.*

Participants reported the ongoing need to integrate a healing focus into Tagai State College's approach to learning and culture but expressed strong concerns about young people having to leave the island for education from Year 6:

*We seem to let the system run over us ... run over our lives ... like when the children have to go away in Grade 6.*

There was broad agreement that there was still a need – as reported in the *Torres Strait and Kaurareg Aboriginal People's Healing Strategy* – for a Police Citizens Youth Club (PCYC) on Masig Island.

#### **d Employment and unemployment**

The opportunities for employment were reported as – currently – limited. Unemployment was common and the healing forum reported that the local employment agency (My Pathway) was letting people down and not doing enough to secure meaningful, long term employment for people. It was noted that addressing issues such as erosion (see below) and caring for country should produce more employment:

*My Pathway has changed its name but the company is still the same and nobody is getting anything out of the program. It might be the program that's the problem though ... not My Pathway.*

#### **e Health and wellbeing**

Forum participants reported that people's health and wellbeing was generally poor. Issues relating to trauma and distress meant people were not well. This led to problems with gambling and addictions, which led to further health problems. People were reported as generally being unaware and uneducated about how to live healthier lives.

#### **f Housing**

Housing on the island was reported as inadequate and when new houses were built and became available there were reported tensions between the Traditional Owners and non-Traditional Owners. This is due to priority being given to Traditional Owners even when the new home is not necessarily well suited to the needs of the Traditional Owner compared to the needs of other community members. Overall, there are reported housing needs on the island that need to be examined and addressed.

#### **g Acknowledgement of land ownership**

There are issues causing community distress in relation to acknowledging land ownership and contentious and disputed boundaries. This causes division and conflict in the community.

#### **h Water**

The supply and quality of water for community members is broadly unreliable and inadequate. This is unacceptable to the community and causes concern. When supply fails, or water tanks fail to operate as they should, there are no plumbers or people with the skills needed to maintain the tanks.

#### **i Erosion**

Communities are extremely stressed about erosion on the island. Masig is experiencing the impact of climate change as a daily reality. The community does not need more research to support the existence or reality of coastal erosion, rising sea levels and high tides. Community distress is further increased by the uncertainty of the \$20 million the state government has committed to addressing erosion across the Torres Strait Islands, which is tied to a matching \$20 million from the Commonwealth. The Commonwealth Government continually refuses to confirm its commitment. The stress of erosion was reported as causing further health issues:

*Even the \$20 million from the state and the promised \$20 million from the Commonwealth won't change people's distress.*



### j *High cost of living*

Being so isolated, Masig Island's transport, food and living costs are extremely high and mean that transport and even basic necessities become unaffordable for some families. Ferry and landing fees are so high that many products become unaffordable. High transport costs prohibit people from moving from the island. This causes a sense of isolation and limits people from visiting family, friends and children on other islands.

### *Community empowerment and control*

In all of these priorities, discussions centered on the need for the community to have more control over their own affairs and for solutions to issues causing community disharmony and distress to be resolved using local/Masig ways and cultural protocols:

*We Elders know the westernised world needs to understand the Masig way of doing things ... white mob needs to fit in with us, not us with them.*

To do this, agencies and departments will need to listen more. Currently the community feels they are not listened to: '[T]he problem is no-one listens to us ... they don't listen to us!' The community is ready to take control:

*We need to stop blaming everyone else. Empowered people blame no-one else.*

*We the Elders have to stand up and empower ourselves and we have to take a stand for, as a community, the solutions we can come up with, and not rely on anyone else.*

The desire for Masig to be a more empowered community was reflected in participants' commitments to take action after the healing forum and in the time before this report returns to the community. Commitments included:

- setting up two Elders Groups
- helping educate people about how the community can move forward for the wellbeing of young people
- working with stakeholders/rangers to develop an erosion plan for Masig (x3)
- support language revitalisation (Kalaw Lagaw Ya)
- volunteer to do sandbagging on the island
- mentor and coach interested people to develop community projects
- increase health education and health promotion
- get the Broadcast for Remote Aboriginal Communities Scheme (BRACS) facility up and running again
- volunteer in any capacity
- The Masigal gal will provide Sibuwana to the Kaurareg Nation on an annual basis at the beginning of each year. Acknowledgement and appreciation of the use of Kaurareg land as access for transit and stay over by the Masig people throughout the year, and for all Masigal gal people that reside in the Kaurareg nation, for employment, education, health, housing and for many other reasons

## Priority actions and next steps

The following table presents the healing solutions that were discussed at the forum. Participants were keen to have these presented in the report, along with opportunities further discussion about who could lead each action once the report was provided to the community. At the next stage of discussion the community will add further actions and develop implementation timelines.

Priority	Actions	Community healing champions	Stakeholders/ partners	Timeline
<b><i>Culture and cultural practices</i></b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- maintain respect for Traditional Owners</li> <li>- create opportunities for young and older people to come together and share time and conversation</li> <li>- develop ways to revitalise language (through BRACS)</li> <li>- Increase knowledge of traditional boundaries</li> <li>- develop education on lore and cultural protocols to influence realistic and positive outcomes</li> <li>- find a facility/safe space/place to hold cultural meetings including men's and women's groups</li> <li>- deliver Kulkalgaw Ya and Yumpla Tok (Creole) program every six months</li> <li>- support and extend rangers archiving program</li> </ul>	Yessie Mosby and Michael Nai	Community, Prescribed Body Corporate (PBC), TAGAI, Torres Strait Regional Authority (TSRA), Torres Strait Islander Regional Council (TSIRC)	Dec 2019
<b><i>Young people</i></b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- maintain language by teaching it in schools</li> <li>- provide support for families when children have to leave the island at the end of Year 6</li> <li>- create a coordinated response and support for children leaving</li> <li>- support children when they come home with programs that strengthen cultural knowledge and identity</li> <li>- deliver Kulkalgaw Ya and Yumpla Tok (Creole) program every 6 months</li> <li>- establish PCYC on Masig</li> <li>- establish the Masig Youth Participation Action Plan</li> </ul>	Tupoa Mosby and Hellen Mosby	Community, TAGAI, PBC, TSRA, Queensland Police Service (QPS)	Dec 2019

Priority	Actions	Community healing champions	Stakeholders/ partners	Timeline
<b>Domestic and family violence</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- increase awareness of domestic violence (DV) and increase support for victims and perpetrators</li> <li>- educate the community on how to spot the signs of DV</li> <li>- run regular TSIRC education sessions</li> <li>- establish a safe yarning place for people to rest and talk in</li> <li>- establish early intervention/prevention programs</li> <li>- establish a childcare centre</li> <li>- establish a mobile play scheme</li> <li>- erect signage around the community promoting healthy relationships</li> <li>- establish aged and disability respite care</li> </ul>	Fr Ned Mosby William Mosby, Elizabeth Warria	Community, Mura Kosker, TAGAI, TSIRC, Queensland Health, TSRA, PBC	Dec 2019
<p>Note: Mura Kosker was identified by the community as the place where healing resources need to be located. Mura Kosker noted the recent employment of two DV community champions and the possibility of support workers being employed in each community.</p>				
<b>Employment/ unemployment</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- increase funding for training programs</li> <li>- identify business and investment opportunities</li> <li>- link and create real jobs through My Pathway Programs</li> <li>- identify key areas for skills training where aspirations of community members and employment opportunities meet</li> <li>- transfer payment from Centrelink to the payroll of the job provider/employer</li> </ul>	Ted Mosby, Colin Messa, Hilda Mosby	Community, My Pathway, TSIRC, TSRA, PBC, QPS	Dec 2019
<b>Health and wellbeing</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Queensland Health to increase services and promotion of Alcohol and Other Drugs Services (AOD), gambling and healthy lifestyles</li> <li>- provide education for awareness and prevention strategies</li> <li>- provide community-wide health checks at the school or in the community hall</li> <li>- identify someone in each family to assist others with health issues</li> <li>- work alongside providers to help the community develop ways to identify and respond to health and wellbeing crises</li> <li>- work alongside rangers to create a community garden</li> </ul>	Frazier Nai, Gikana Mosby, Susannah Mosby	Community, Queensland Health, Mura Kosker, gambling funds, TSRA, TAGAI, PBC, QPS	Dec 2019



Priority	Actions	Community healing champions	Stakeholders/ partners	Timeline
<b>Housing</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- increase community involvement in the design and assignment of houses</li> <li>- increase involvement of the TSIRC and develop an equitable process for assigning houses</li> </ul>	John Morris, Yessie Mosby	Community, TSIRC, PBC	Dec 2019
<b>Water</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- train local people to undertake maintenance of tanks and water supply</li> <li>- commission two more tanks with hoses</li> <li>- change tanks changed from fiberglass to polyethylene to increase durability and reduce maintenance costs</li> <li>- write a letter from community to the Mayor outlining commitments made and not delivered</li> </ul>	Fr Mosby, Hilda Mosby, Songhie Billy	Community, TSIRC, My Pathway, TSRA, PBC, Queensland Health (QH)	Dec 2019
<b>Erosion</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- explore our own solutions and evidence base</li> <li>- find funding support to complete the Masig Erosion Social Impact Assessment, which was commissioned by the community and used to advocate for government support and response</li> <li>- equitably divide funding coming into the Torres Strait to address the issue of erosion</li> </ul>	Francis Nai, John Morris	Community, TSIRC, TSRA, PBC	Dec 2019
<b>Land ownership</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- explore and develop appropriate further solutions with community members</li> </ul>	John Morris, Yessie Mosby, Fr Mosby	Community, PBC, TSIRC	Dec 2019
<b>High cost of living</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- advocate for reduced fares when the next contract is negotiated</li> <li>- advocate council to reduce local landing fees in order to lower the cost of food</li> </ul>	Frazier Nai, John Morris	Community, TSIRC, PBC	Dec 2019

This report has been prepared by The Healing Foundation in order for the Masig community to review the content and use it for further yarning about the issues and solutions that matter most to them. An implementation plan will then be developed to ensure that the Masig Healing Forum, leads to meaningful actions that support healing and improve community outcomes.



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