



CERRIRI MERIBA

Kerriri Meriba Ged Iling Sidaun report Kerriri Island Healing Forum Report

The Healing Foundation

The Healing Foundation is a national Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisation that provides a platform to amplify the voices and lived experience of Stolen Generations survivors and their families.

We work with communities to create a place of safety, providing an environment for Stolen Generations survivors and their families to speak for themselves, tell their own stories, and be in charge of their own healing.

We promote trauma-aware, healing-informed practice to help government, policymakers, and workforces understand their role in intergenerational healing.

By addressing unresolved trauma in First Nations communities – trauma that was caused by colonisation and actions like the forced removal of children – we are walking alongside communities on the path to healing.

We are governed by a First Nations Board and Executive and guided in our work by our Stolen Generations and Youth Reference Groups.

Our work honours our First Nations ancestors to ensure our future generations continue to thrive for the next 60,000 years.



Mura Kosker Sorority

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



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Acknowledgements

This report has been prepared by The Healing Foundation for the Kerriri community to review the content and use it for further yarning about the issues and solutions that matter most to them.

We would like to acknowledge community members living with the impacts of intergenerational trauma, who generously shared their stories, thoughts, insights and concerns to ensure the report is an honest reflection of their lived experience.

This report acknowledges the vision of Milton and Louisa Savage, who for almost a decade have sought to have healing forums take place in the Torres Strait. We also acknowledge the lands, Traditional Owners, Elders (past, present and emerging) of the Kaurareg Nation and the courage of the Kerriri community to have a conversation centered on trauma and healing.

Further, this report acknowledges the significant efforts and commitment of the reference group to ensure the Kerriri Meriba Ged Iling Sidaun could still take place during a year in which our families and communities have been so affected by COVID-19. Reference group members were:

- Regina Turner
- Majella Lynch-Harlow
- Eugene Dorante
- Roxanne Dorante
- Councillor Seriako Dorante
- Josephine David-Petro
- Enid Tom

- Manaima Pearson
- Fred Gela
- Jackson Ahwang (Mura Kosker Sorority)
- Yuriko Nakachi (Mura Kosker Sorority)
- Olice Whap (Mura Kosker Sorority)
- Frank Cook (The Healing Foundation)
- Nancy Jeffrey (The Healing Foundation).

The Kerriri Meriba Ged Iling Sidaun was established through a partnership between The Healing Foundation and Mura Kosker Sorority.













Introduction

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 deal with 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 the gathering, and more than 600 people from across Island communities contributed to its design.

The gathering 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, launched in 2015. The Healing Strategy had five key areas:

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

In 2017, The Healing Foundation formed a partnership with Mura Kosker Sorority to further the healing priorities outlined in the healing strategy, by implementing community healing forums across three Island communities at a local level.

Torres Strait communities were invited through an expression of interest to nominate to host their own healing forum. The successful Islands were Kaurareg Community (Thursday Island), lama Island and Masig Island. The community healing 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.

After the success of the 2018 forums, the communities on Kerriri, Dauan and Saibai islands were keen to partner with The Healing Foundation and Mura Kosker Sorority to hold their own healing forums. These were scheduled for June/July 2020 but were postponed due to the COVID-19 pandemic. They took place in a COVID-safe environment in September 2020.

"We acknowledge the past injustices and the removal of people. We acknowledge the pain and trauma. We acknowledge our Kaurareg ancestors and ask them to guide us today. This place carries a lot of memories, forgiveness, acceptance and respect. This is a special day."

Kaurareg Elder Milton Savage



All community healing forums that have taken place in the Torres Strait have aimed to build:

- Strong community leadership and governance that fosters pride in Torres Strait and Kaurareg Aboriginal peoples' spirituality and culture.
- A self-determined community with the skills, capacity and support to proactively promote and ensure community and child safety and wellbeing.

The objectives of the community healing forums were to:

- Support the community to create and lead healing opportunities.
- Establish a healing network with champions and leaders that 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 *Kerriri Meriba Ged Iling Sidaun* (Kerriri Island Community Healing), which took place on 21 September 2020. There, 39 people representing community and agencies came together to talk about healing needs and solutions.

Setting the scene for culturally safe yarning

The Kaurareg people know Hammond Island as Kerriri and are known to have occupied this area prior to first contact with Europeans. Kerriri is located in the Southern or Prince of Wales Island group of the Torres Strait. For thousands of years, the Kaurareg followed traditional patterns of hunting, fishing and agriculture, and maintained close cultural and trading ties with the Aboriginal groups of the Northern Peninsula Area of Cape York. These close ties still exist today.

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.

The Healing Foundation Portfolio/Project Lead Frank Cook guided participants in a Sibwanan/Omar ceremony. This ceremony is an old ceremony that was customary in the Torres Strait for how Island communities sought permission to enter other communities. The ceremony was extinguished when the Torres Strait Islands were colonised.

When healing forums took place in the Torres Strait during 2018, the community and The Healing Foundation saw an important opportunity to reinstate a cultural ceremony that returned the power to the Elders and the community, and this important tradition was reinstated.

It was determined that all future forums in the Torres Strait would commence with a Sibwanan/Omar Ceremony.

The ceremony begins by the laying down of a mat, as a place for meeting, and the exchange of gifts. This provides permission from the Elders to The Healing Foundation to 'come and work amongst us'. It formally welcomes those from outside the community to come and work with the community and recognises them as friends who are no longer strangers. It is a one-off ceremony for present and all future visits.

A key part of the ceremony is the exchange of gifts, and the following were exchanged.



Sibuwanan/Omar (gift) to partners – Mura Kosker Sorority and The Healing Foundation

Title: Dugong

Artist: James Dorante

Date: 2020

Kerriri Wongai wood and varnish

Sponsored by: Kerriri Dorge Mudh Indigenous

Corporation

Sibuwanan/Omar (gift) to Kaurareg Tribal Nation

Title: Solitary Dhangal (Lonely Dugong) **Artist:** Anonymous Hammond Island carver

Date: 2020

Kerriri Wongai wood and varnish

Sponsored by: The Healing Foundation

Kerriri community members requested that these gifts be displayed publicly on Thursday Island or Horn Island to represent the healing process between the Kerriri (Hammond Island) community and the Kaurarea Nation. All participants were accorded permission to be in the community and 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 Sorority, The Healing Foundation, and the Department of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Partnerships (DATSIP).

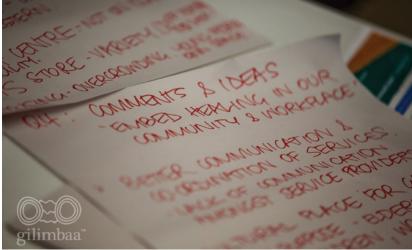
Importantly, Father Neil Muir (representing Bishop James Foley, Bishop of Cairns) restated the apology, delivered by Bishop Foley on 18 February 2020 on Kerriri Island. The apology acknowledged the contribution the Catholic Church had made to the hurt and pain caused by the forced removal of Kaurareg people from Kerriri Island in 1922, and the decree that Kaurareg people could only return to Kerriri if they were willing to 'convert' to Catholicism at a later time (from 1947 onwards):

"Given that strong and important request, I, without reservation, on behalf of the Catholic Church, do now apologise and express my sorrow and sadness for any hurt my church may have been involved in in this matter."

Apology delivered by Father Neil Muir on behalf of Bishop James Foley.

Community members acknowledged and accepted the apology, while noting that there is still much healing to take place as memories, hurt and pain remain across generations. The forum was acknowledged to be a step within a broader healing process.







Key findings

The healing conversation that took place at the *Kerriri Meriba Ged Iling Sidaun* centred on three key questions:

- What are the issues that are most concerning or hurting our community (for young people, families and community)?
- What are the community-based healing solutions that best address these concerns?
- How can service providers most help the communities to establish these healing solutions?

Yarning circles took place for each question. Groups comprised a number of community groups, a group with Catholic Church representation only and, importantly, two children's groups – one for boys and one for girls.

Note: a key healing outcome of the Kerriri Meriba Ged Iling Sidaun was that after the forum there would be no further reference to the island as Hammond Island and only Kerriri Island. Accordingly, this report has changed all references to Hammond Island made during the forum to Kerriri Island.





"Today gives us the understanding that we want to take action and that we want these actions to happen and my brother will be able to give a Welcome to Country and never mention the words of trauma again because he is healed."

The voice of the children

Before presenting the findings of the wider community, these pages give voice to the children of Kerriri (4 to 12-year-olds and 14 in total across the two groups) and presents their concerns and healing solutions verbatim and as they were presented to the whole forum.

What we like about Kerriri Island

Girls

- Playing: sciddle, with puppies, tiggy.
- Playing outdoors.
- Playing football, basketball, volleyball.
- Swimming and diving.
- Seeing cousins.
- Attending parties.
- Fishing and hunting.
- Painting.
- Island dancing.
- Cooking (damper, cakes, scones) and eating.
- School and playing on school equipment.
- The environment (tress, camping, picnics).

Boys

- Swimming.
- Environment.
- Gatherings.
- Camping.
- Fishing.
- Family.
- Playing.

What makes us sad?

Girls

- Teasing and bullying at school and the beach.
- Fighting, punching and pushing at the oval.
- When people don't respect Atha and Aka.
- Stealing other people's food and cars.
- Littering don't pick up rubbish and dropping food.
- Getting into trouble with your parents.
- Sorry Business.
- People being gay.
- Swearing.
- Jumping on the trampoline.
- Smoking and alcohol.
- Domestic violence.
- Not looking after pets.

Boys

- No swimming too many crocodiles and sharks.
- The environment is not healthy.
- Safety for kids at home.
- Losing your family.

What is the solution:

Girls

- Be nice to each other.
- Listen more to our Elders.
- Have more rubbish bins to stop the littering.
- Learn from our mistakes.
- See family and cousins more often.
- Report bullying and violence.
- Have family gatherings instead of partying.

Boys

- Community must lobby for a swimming pool.
- Keep the environment clean for less pollution.
- For kids safety talk to people you can trust.
- More family gatherings to enjoy Christmas, swimming, camping, fishing.



Issues that concern our community

Across the yarning circles there was a wide range of concerns and issues that were impacting children, families and older people. Collectively, these were holding the community back from being able to reach its full capacity and were barriers for people taking hold of the opportunities that exist on Kerriri for enhanced wellbeing.

All the issues and concerns identified across the healing forum fell mainly into four broader themes: loss of culture and identity; health and wellbeing; issues affecting young people; and family wellbeing and supports. These themes are not discrete from each other but are interrelated and largely dependent on each other.

"Something is missing here in the conversation.

Our community is leading the Torres Strait in suicide.

How broken must our community be when our young people, our babies, are taking their own lives?"

Loss of culture and identity

The sense of the collective trauma embedded within the community from the forced removals from 1922 onwards, as well as the circumstances under which return was granted, was prevalent throughout the discussions during the forum.

Disconnection and loss were themes that continued to be spoken about throughout the day. These were expressed in terms of loss of languages, connection to land, traditional song and dances, and cultural traditions and ceremonies. As one yarning circle noted, there is now within the community 'a lack of knowledge and understanding of cultural ways'. The trauma is caused by events that are within living memory for many people living on Kerriri, but there was also an acknowledgement of the intergenerational trauma that is affecting young people and young families (as described in the sections below).

As a second yarning circle noted 'there is longterm trauma in our community and it goes across families and generations. Histories are still being captured and recorded and truth telling was deemed to be an important part of dealing with the past and healing for the future.

The policies of previous State and Commonwealth Governments and the actions of the Catholic Church were noted as mitigating the community's ability to be self-determining and empowered both in the past and through contemporary policy decisions:

"Government can act in ways that cause trauma and disempower us or they can act in ways that help us to heal and empower us. The can either tell us what they are going to do or listen and ask us how they can support the things we want to do."

Health and wellbeing

The health and wellbeing of the community was a primary theme during the healing forum and it was linked to past and present trauma. There was concern that the community has to rely on too many services that are located and delivered on Thursday Island, and the highest health priority for the community was the establishment of a health centre on Kerriri.

There is significant anxiety within the community in regard to the vulnerability of older people (and emergency cases more generally) becoming unwell and having to travel by boat/ferry to access the health/medical centre on Thursday Island.

The need for a health centre is related to primary and physical healthcare, and the ability to offer support services for families where there are mental health issues (including suicide and self-harm).

Each yarning circle identified this as an increasing issue and cause for concern in the community.

A health centre could also be a location where issues relating to healthy eating, drug and alcohol use and misuse, and sexual health could be addressed – all identified as issues within the community.

As well as primary and allied health, there is significant concern within the community about environmental health issues. Community health and wellbeing is being negatively affected by poor water supply and quality, and inadequate and ineffective sewerage and wastewater systems. Further, inadequate housing has led to overcrowding and no housing for younger families and young mums with children. This was seen to be having a negative impact on people's health and wellbeing.

"There is no first response here and no way for us to respond quickly to the emergency needs of the community. It can take two hours to get a sick relative from wharf to wharf [Kerriri to Thursday Island]. It is actually a disadvantage for us to be so close to Thursday Island because the government thinks we don't need service here, as we can just go to Thursday Island ... that's not how it works though."

"There are 35 agencies on Thursday Island and none are helping the people on Kerriri."

Issues affecting young people

The Kerriri community determined that a key focus of the healing forum was to discuss the needs and concerns **of** young people, as well as forum participants' concerns **for** young people.

There was agreement across all yarning circles that there was a general lack of activities and programs (formal and informal) for young people. This includes the lack of an afterschool program for children, who then get bored and act up, to the point of sometimes committing crimes and getting into trouble.

Further, there is no designated space – cultural or sporting – where activities and programs for young people can take place. There is a lack of sporting programs, facilities and equipment that can enhance young people's interest and development in sport as a means to keeping young people occupied and stopping boredom.

Social media was identified as having a negative impact on young people and was leading to new and old conflicts. Cyberbullying and physical bullying were both seen as issues.

While young people were seen to be disengaged from education, their families and culture, there was also an identified lack of employment and training opportunities for young people.

Finally, while the yarning circles suggested young people do not listen to their parents and Elders and were not learning or interested in the 'cultural ways, traditions and family ties', they also noted that there was a lack of – or too few – role models and mentors for young people.



Family wellbeing and supports

A key issue identified for families on Kerriri was a lack of family support services. Two primary services lacking in the community are childcare services and – as noted already – afterschool programs. This adds to family stress when there are many parents who lack the parenting skills to bring up strong and healthy children.

The healing forum noted that there are divisions within families and children groups and divisions across families, caused by too much gossiping. Other family issues include domestic and family violence as well as alcohol and other drug use and misuse, with fetal alcohol spectrum disorder (FASD) noted as being present in the community. This is linked to families not being engaged in community issues, programs, events and activities.

A key need is to address the lack of employment and training opportunities for parents and the low levels of financial literacy that exist within many families. Families – including Elders – are negatively impacted by the very high cost of living on Kerriri. The costs of goods (such as fuel and perishables) shipped from the mainland through Horn and Thursday Islands are very high. When factored against Community Development Program wages the differential becomes even more demanding on family budgets. The lack of competition to IBIS Shipping as the predominant supplier means that prices of goods and services are largely unaffected by competitive supply and demand.

Older family members and Elders suggested they often feel there is a lack of respect, and Elder abuse was identified as an issue. Further, there is ongoing trauma and sadness from loss of language and traditions, and with no programs and social activities specifically for older community members, and no transport to support them, there is ongoing isolation and sadness.

"We have to think about how we are drawing out of traumatised, bankrupt people who have nothing left in the tank. We have to empower the people on the ground."

Community-led healing solutions

As was the case with the issues that concerned participants at the healing forum, the community-led solutions can be categorised into the same four broad themes. Again, this report notes the four themes are not discrete from each other but are largely dependent on each other.

Culture and identity

Just as the children in the yarning circle suggested more family gatherings and increased events and activities to embed cultural practices in the community, the adults who took part in the yarning circles suggested more family and community activities.

A common theme across all yarning circles was the need to continue teaching and reviving traditional lore, song and dance, as well as understanding and practice of local languages.

One strategy was to bring Elders, parents and children together in schools to practise traditional song and cultural dancing.

Importantly, the community suggested there needed to be funding for the establishment of digital storytelling as part of broader truthtelling to better understand, acknowledge and respect the history of Kerriri Island, the people and nations, and the effects of past and present government policies on the community and Kaurareg nation.



Health and wellbeing

The most common priority within the broad theme of health and wellbeing was the establishment of a health centre on Kerriri Island. This would address immediate and future primary physical and mental health issues within the community. It should be a space where culturally appropriate and sensitive services can be delivered, including Social and Emotional Wellbeing (SEWB) services. This would then provide an opportunity to train and employ SEWB workers.

General practitioners, nurses and allied health professionals (e.g. physiotherapists, nutritionists, etc.) could be located in the health centre on a permanent or rostered basis, according to community health needs. The location could also be used as a facility where qualified ambulance and SES workers provide training to upskill people in the community.

Importantly, forum participants suggested that prevention strategies for suicide needed to be spoken about more, and prevention and intervention tools needed to be developed to help families and the community deal with suicide.

In terms of environmental health, the State Government needs to be lobbied around improving housing through the development of a Kerriri Island housing strategy. Additionally, one yarning circle suggested the establishment of a community and family gardens program that enhances the environment and promotes growing healthy foods (e.g. establish a coconut garden).

Issues affecting young people

In terms of addressing the needs and issues relating to young people, the healing forum was consistent in suggesting that young people's voices needed to be elevated. This could be addressed through the establishment of a youth network and/or the Kerriri Youth Council.

The Youth Council would advocate and partner with the State Government to establish a whole-of-government youth strategy to address the issues identified in the previous sections – including the development of programs, activities and infrastructure.

"We have a young community and we need to teach the younger generation who they are ... we have to pass on knowledge because what is going to happen when the older people die? We have to teach the young ones the right way."

Family wellbeing and supports

Healing supports and solutions under this theme had a strong emphasis on education for young parents and families. These included drug and alcohol programs that educate families on the effects of alcohol and other drugs (AOD), as well as more education to support families around family violence intervention, prevention and support services.

As well as education programs around AOD and family violence, the community identified the provision of counselling services in both areas as a healing solution. Other suggested programs included budgeting and financial literacy skills, a family wellbeing program and health promotion initiatives.

Establishing Strong Men's and Strong Women's groups was also a consistent recommendation across all yarning circles, and the groups established after the healing forum at lama Island were identified as good examples to follow.

A childcare centre was seen as a pressing need, but the healing forum identified that there would have to be an evidence base established to support the advocacy work that might be required to secure funding.

"Time is changing, and culture is changing, and we need to make the healing of our community community-owned and community-driven"

Yarning circle participants across all age groups saw increasing the number of family gatherings and community events as a successful strategy for strengthening families. Specifically, one yarning circle suggested the community could enter into a memorandum of understanding with the Torres Strait Island Regional Council (TSIRC) to access the community hall for gatherings.

Finally, a community funeral fund could/should be established to support families in their Sorry Business.

Other healing solutions

In addition to the healing solutions outlined above, there were others that fell outside of the four main themes. These were:

- Develop a research team to gather evidence of what supports are needed and how these supports might best be delivered.
- Establish strategies and mechanisms that ensure better communication amongst service providers, better coordination of services, and that services are culturally sensitive and trauma aware and healing informed. Establish an interagency group.
- Ensure the community is aware of what services are available, where and when.
- Advocate for community-based policing 24/7.
- Kerriri community to form a partnership with Tagai State College.
- Advocate for government compensation for past policies.

"Where are the service providers today? Why are they not here and why are we so disrespected?"

Important commitments

- The language name for Hammond Island, Kerriri, will be used by the community and all stakeholders from the date of the forum onwards.
- Sibwanan/Omar ceremony to be incorporated into all Welcomes on Kerriri Island.
- A number of commitments were made at the healing forum from the representatives from Our Lady of the Sacred Heart School. These were:
 - » consider ways to waive school fees and commit to no school fees for Kerriri or Kaurareg families
 - » no chasing of debts when family members pass
 - » the school will now be available as a community centre and can be used for community events and gatherings.



Priority actions and next steps

The following table presents the healing solutions that were discussed at the Kerriri Meriba Ged Iling Sidaun. Participants were keen to have these presented in the report with opportunities for them to further discuss who could lead each action once the report was provided to the community.

Priority healin	g solutions/actions	Community champion(s)	Stakeholders/ partners
Culture and identity	More family gatherings, events and activities that promote cultural practices		
	Teaching and reviving traditional lore, song and dance, as well as understanding and practice of local languages		
	Bring Elders, parents and children together in schools to practise traditional song and cultural dancing		
	Digital storytelling project with a focus on truth telling to better understand, acknowledge and respect the history of Kerriri Island		
	Reintroduce cultural protocols for those visiting and working on Kerriri Island and make sure they are implemented		
Health and wellbeing	Establish the case for a health centre to be permanently located on Kerriri Island, with services to include primary, allied and mental health		
	Train community members to become Social and Emotional Wellbeing workers		

Priority healing solutions/actions		Community champion(s)	Stakeholders/ partners
	Train community members in First Aid and emergency services		
	Develop a strategy with tools to assist the community in suicide prevention and intervention		
	Lobby the State Government to work in partnership with the community to develop a Kerriri housing strategy		
	Establish community/family gardens growing healthy produce		
Children and youth	Community to lobby for a swimming pool on Kerriri		
	Make sure there are more rubbish bins on Kerriri		
	Have more community gatherings where families can be together		
	Establish the Kerriri Youth Council/network to provide advice on youth issues and the required solutions – develop a youth strategy in partnership with Police– Citizens Youth Clubs/DATSIP/other youth stakeholders		

Priority actions and next steps (continued)

Priority healing solutions/actions		Community champion(s)	Stakeholders/ partners
Family wellbeing and supports	Establish drug and alcohol education programs and services (e.g. counselling) for parents		
	Establish programs and intervention, prevention and support services (e.g. counselling) to support families experiencing domestic and family violence		
	Establish financial literacy programs to improve families' budgeting and financial management skills		
	Establish a family wellbeing program to support and improve young families' parenting skills		
	Establish a healthy lifestyles program (including healthy eating)		
	Establishing Strong Men's and Strong Women's groups		
	Establish the evidence base to support the advocacy work required to secure funding for a childcare/early learning centre		
	Establish a memorandum of understanding with TSIRC to access the community hall for gatherings		
	Establish a funeral fund for community members to access		

Priority healin	g solutions/actions	Community champion(s)	Stakeholders/ partners
Other healing solutions	Establish a research team to gather evidence of what supports are needed and how these supports might best be delivered		
	Develop strategies to improve communication amongst service providers and increase service coordination – establish an interagency group		
	Ensure the community is aware of what services are available		
	Ensure services are provided in culturally sensitive and trauma aware healing informed ways		
	Advocate for community-based policing 24/7		
	Kerriri community to form a partnership with Tagai State College		
	Advocate for government compensation for past policies		















"This report is the community story ... it is this community's story. You cannot get closer to the community than what we did today."



