



HealingFoundation

Strong Spirit • Strong Culture • Strong People

SAIBAILGAW

*Saibailgaw Dhoeynidhay
Healing Forum Report*

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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.



Acknowledgements

This report was prepared by The Healing Foundation for the Saibai Island 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 Saibai community and their courage 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 forum could still take place during a year in which our families and communities have been so affected by COVID-19. Reference group members were:

- Mabel Walit
- Marianna Babia
- Keri Akiba
- Cr. Nathan Tabuai
- Tina Tabuai
- Jeffery Aniba-Waia
- Rodney Mabo (Mura Kosker Sorority)
- Yuriko Nakachi (Mura Kosker Sorority)
- Olice Whap (Mura Kosker Sorority)
- Frank Cook (The Healing Foundation)
- Nancy Jeffrey (The Healing Foundation).

Saibailgaw Dheoynidhay 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, 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 Island (Thursday Island), Iama 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 Saibai, Dauan and Saibai Islands were keen to partner with The Healing Foundation and Mura Kosker Sorority to hold their own 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 are here to talk about our needs and concerns ... the things we face every day. We need to talk about what we can do and how to work together from here ... what we should do and how we can do it better.”



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 Saibai Island Healing Forum, which took place in September 2020. There, 17 people representing community and agencies came together to talk about healing needs and solutions.

[Torres Strait Island Healing Forums \(Saibai Island\) \[YouTube video\]](#)

Setting the scene for culturally safe yarning

Creating 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.

Sorry Business

Importantly, a few days ahead of Saibailgaw Dheoynidhay, the reference group received news that a community member had passed and Sorry Business would be taking place on the day of Saibailgaw Dheoynidhay.

Consideration was given to deferring Saibailgaw Dheoynidhay, but after sensitive consultation with the family, they affirmed the importance of the healing process and their desire to see Saibailgaw Dheoynidhay go ahead once respectful acknowledgement was given to the family by the visitors to Saibai Island.

Accordingly, on the day of Saibailgaw Dheoynidhay and before the formal commencement of the forum, all visitors paid their respects to the family, bringing gifts to their home to acknowledge their sorrow and grief. This was in turn acknowledged by the family as comforting and added to their own healing process.

Sibwanan/Omar

Once Sorry Business had taken place, and with acceptance that Saibailgaw Dheoynidhay could now go ahead, The Healing Foundation Portfolio/Project Lead Frank Cook led 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. It had been eroded by colonisation, when Torres Strait communities had to seek permission to implement all of their customary ways. Permission for Sibwanan/Omar was not granted.

The community and the Healing Foundation saw an important opportunity to reinstate the Saibailgaw Dheoynidhay, a cultural ceremony that returned the power to the Elders and the



community, and this important tradition was reinstated during the forum.

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.

The gifts exchanged included a Dhibal crafted by Elder Sedrick Waia of the Ati-Koedal Clan.

Dhibal is a headdress, unique to Saibai Island and the Western Torres Strait, and it comes from the story Gilbar of Burum Clan (Pig Clan). In the story, a woman named Gilbar walked across the swamps to a well called Mag. It was a dry season (Baydhamaw Thonar) and the time of the Shark Constellations. The water was very low. Gilbar descended down the bank to fill her coconut shells, called Kusu.

While she was filling the shells, she saw in the water's reflection the spirit men with huge headdresses called Dhibal. These spirit men



“The Sorry Business we did today is always important to people’s healing. When a family is struggling in our community it is important that we hold out a hand and help them.”

were from the sky, the rain makers called Madhubal. The spirit men took Gilbar up to the sky. People looked for her for three days. She finally descended a coconut palm, carrying three plants, Taro (Saylam), Banana Sucker (Dhamuay) and Sugar Cane (Dhawpay).

When the Star Constellation Thoegay’s Spear (Southern Cross) dips on the southern horizon, the rains of Thoegay arrive. Special men of Saibai appear on the western end of the village and perform the sacred dance on the shallows of the sea water, stomping their feet and beating the surface with long poles chanting ‘Madubal a, madhubal a, ngoey kay madhubal a’. This chant is sung continuously and means ‘Are we the Rain Spirits? Are we the Rain Spirits? Yes, we are the Rain Spirits! Then the rains of Thoegay arrive. The earth is ready for planting, and Saylam, Dhamuay and Dhawpay are planted.

Saibai Island is the only island in the Torres Strait where rain dances are performed as part of cultural traditions.

A Woerakar branch was also presented.

A Woerakar is a beach hibiscus tree with yellow flowers. The leaf is used as a symbol of peace on Saibai Island. When the London Missionary Society Evangelists, led by Dr. McFarlane, arrived in Torres Strait, they brought Christianity

into the area. The Torres Strait was used as a steppingstone to the larger country of Papua New Guinea. The aim was to train Torres Strait Islander peoples, especially the men in the top western Islands of Saibai, Dauan and Boigu, which had close clan ties with Papua New Guinea coastal and river villages.

The missionaries landed on Dauan Island. Garmay, the Dheoynidhay Clan leader, brought them up to Saibai and carried the Woerakar branch, to signify the strangers on board the canoe came in peace. The leader of the Noedhay Samu Clan walked down to the water’s edge also carrying the symbol of peace. It meant that the Saibai Clans were peacefully ready to receive the strangers.

The Woerakar branch was always used for the purpose of welcoming new arrivals to Clan land on Saibai Island, so it was used to welcome strangers who had arrived for the Saibailgaw Dheoynidhay.

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 and the forum formally commenced with introductions from representatives of Mura Kosker Sorority and The Healing Foundation.

Key findings

Due to the importance of Sorry Business, the agenda and time for overall discussions was significantly shortened. Further, with Sorry Business in process, a smaller number of community members were able to attend Saibailgaw Dheoynidhay.

Despite this, two yarning circles were established by the community – one for the men and one for the women. Both yarning circles identified some key issues that were causing hurt in the community and some healing solutions that could be developed to address each of the issues.

Importantly, a key theme across all the discussions was a lack of government support and commitment to self-determination – that is, government agencies working in true partnership with the people and families of Saibai Island to ensure healing solutions are identified and led by the people, families and organisations who live there.

“We have intergenerational trauma, so we need intergenerational healing. We need to talk about the healing journey ... healing ... we are responsible for our own healing. People are dying before they reach 60 years of age because the body is not healing.”

“Today we need to hear more than good words. We have heard wise words before but how does that change anything? How does that affect a person and help them heal? We need more than wise words.”



Culture, identity and wellbeing

Across the two yarning circles, there was concern about the loss of culture or at least the maintenance of cultural traditions. It was noted by the women that clan and kinship systems had been disrupted by Western practices and colonisation.

“Saibai was first called America. Bamaga and Seisia are Saibai. People were not forced to leave. They moved from Saibai and set up Bamaga and Seisia caused by the natural disaster when there was a king tide. Songs were composed about people leaving and with no human connection, the island began to cry.”

Both yarning circles noted that colonisation continues to affect the community, and while there had not been a forced removal of the community, families had left, due to a king tide and set up communities in Bamaga and Seisia, both on the northern tip of Cape York. These ties are still held between families on Saibai Island and the Cape York communities.

The process of leaving Saibai and then returning, the past and present processes of colonisation and the traumas associated with both were having negative impacts on the community. The following were noted:

- Alcohol/drugs/smoking were affecting the community, and individual and family wellbeing were reduced as the levels of addiction increased.
- Associated with the pain of trauma and the use and misuse of alcohol and other drugs, there were concerning levels of domestic and family violence.
- Also associated with the effects of trauma, children were either not engaged in education or were performing poorly.
- As a result of poor levels of education, unemployment was high for current job seekers and likely to be higher for the next generation.



“Young people don’t care, and they need to be taught traditional protocols. Instead, they go down south and get exposed to all sorts of things and then they have no respect for themselves and their identities and their mothers.”



As one participant noted, ‘we need to raise our children out of our Indigenous lore rather than our colonial past.’

The women of Saibai spent a good deal of time talking about Indigenous culture and lore. The loss of belief systems, language (only two people can speak the local language) and culture, and not knowing rules and responsibilities within the kinship structure (and not caring), had led to young people having poor social, physical, spiritual and emotional judgement.

A key issue raised at Saibailgaw Dheoynidhay was that there were no activities for young people and therefore boredom sets in. Young people indicated they wanted more structured activities and events and were keen to join up with young people on Dauan and have coordinated activities through the Police-Citizens Youth Clubs.

Native Title, land and location

The location of Saibai Island was a key focus of the discussions. The isolation of the island from the rest of Queensland – the mainland – and the proximity to Papua New Guinea were both key challenges. Both had a particular impact during 2020 and the COVID-19 pandemic. One participant suggested COVID-19 had been a blessing ‘to breathe and build our strength’.

Alternatively, it was noted that during COVID-19, there were no supports offered by the Queensland State Government other than the added presence of the Border Force. This increased peoples’ concern that COVID-19 was going to come from Papua New Guinea.

The location of Saibai in relation to Papua New Guinea led to a number of traditional owner families from Papua New Guinea settling on Saibai in the 1970s. This increased the complexity of assigning housing to non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families, and land ownership/Native Title more generally. There was acknowledged tension between the Saibai families and those from Papua New Guinea.

The yarning circles also suggested that in terms of Native Title, the Deed of Grant in Trust was not being respected and there are some communication issues between the Prescribed Body Corporate (PBC) and the leaders of the seven clans of Saibai. Cultural heritage was also identified as not being respected, and an example was cited of culturally significant trees that were cut down to create a grandstand without proper consultation.

Importantly, a key issue affecting the people and families of Saibai is land erosion and the lack of serious government engagement and funding to mitigate its effects. There is currently no funding or support for Caring for Country programs.

Finally, the limited amount of land available on Saibai Island is a current problem that is likely to escalate in the future, in terms of housing needs. Homes with up to 12 people living in them due to limited alternative housing options were identified as problematic, but with limited land available for new housing stock, environmental health issues were likely to increase rather than decrease.

“Because we have looked after this land for thousands of years it’s appropriate we take our island back. We have to hold the island for our children and make sure this is a healing place.”

“The seven clans of Saibai need permission from the Chair of the PBC to meet where the Uncles back where the Grandfathers used to meet. There is a gap that exists and only the Uncles can do it ... only the Uncles can heal ... the healings need to come from there.”

Economic wellbeing

The main issue hurting the Saibai community, in terms of economic wellbeing, was that local people are not being trained or do not have access to local employment. There is an employment base that includes jobs in health, education and the Border Force, but the fact that many workers are fly-in/fly-out is a source of frustration.

It was not clear from the yarning circles what the barriers to employment are, but all age groups and genders face challenges. This is leading to young people not having education and career aspirations and no clear pathway into employment. With long-term unemployment a likely outcome, this leads to family breakdown, as highlighted in the earlier part of the finding section.

Employers on the island and key government stakeholders have not yet shown any commitment to long-term, meaningful employment of local people. The Saibailgaw Dheoynidhay suggested there were many opportunities for local employment and training as well as employment in traditional trades.

Concerns were also raised about housing. One Elder, who had been a teacher in the community for 27 years, was living in motel accommodation after being told that the wait time for housing nearer to his family would be two years. This is particularly challenging for Elders experiencing health problems, and their families.



Services and service provision

In terms of the service providers and the services they deliver, some key issues were raised. These included the fact that there was no integration of service delivery, which meant services were fragmented and not well-known in the community.

In addition, too many services delivered in the community were not culturally sensitive to Saibai culture, knowledge and traditions, and were therefore culturally unsafe and inappropriate for the local context. Indeed, many staff delivering services had no knowledge of the community before arriving and certainly had little information and/or knowledge about kinship structures.

Awareness and understanding of local cultures and traditions, as well as kinship structures, are known critical success factors in delivering health and wellbeing services to Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander peoples and families. Where such knowledge and awareness is absent, so too is respect, and clients then become vulnerable to trauma being triggered and/or re-triggered.

Summary

The yarning at the Saibailgaw Dheoynidhay was limited in the end by time and numbers. Both the result of Sorry Business taking place so soon and over the period of the forum. It was noted that there was a need for a bigger conversation with a larger representation of families and community in the future – perhaps over two days where the first day is a more social and informal time, ahead of the formal yarning around trauma and healing.

However, ahead of the solutions, it is important to note that a key outcome from the Saibailgaw Dheoynidhay was a commitment from those there to initiate and provide an ongoing focus on healing the divisions between the Traditional Owners and families of Saibai, as well as the 14 families who settled there from Papua New Guinea.

“Someone has to do something about this side and the other side [Western Point] ... this is the healing time ... There is some kind of grace here and we can work together and today we have started the conversation that we can co-exist”.

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 with opportunities for them to further discuss who could lead each action once the report was provided to the community. At the next stage of discussion, the community will add additional actions and develop implementation timelines.

Priority healing solutions/actions	Community champion(s)	Stakeholders/partners
Improve communication across all stakeholders – especially PBC and the community, as well as the Department of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Partnerships (DATSIP), Queensland Health, Queensland Build, the Torres Strait Regional Authority and Torres Strait Island Regional Council.		
Set up quarterly stakeholder meetings/forums with community representation to discuss issues, events and services.		
Establish good leadership models, mentors and roles models for young people.		
Restore ways for women to gather and ensure their voices are heard and included.		
Start healthy living programs for families and children.		
Establish alcohol and other drugs awareness and education programs for adults and young people.		

Priority actions and next steps (continued)

Priority healing solutions/actions	Community champion(s)	Stakeholders/partners
Develop a model of integrated service delivery for all families on Saibai Island.		
Develop youth programs that assist in understanding, respecting and embracing Saibai culture, traditions and practices.		
Establish community protocols that guide visitors and service providers and ensure cultural protocols are understood and observed.		
Establish an induction process for new staff and visitors, where kinship structures are understood.		
Ensure when service providers come, they sit and learn our ways and cultural knowledge.		
Develop a housing strategy in consultation with the community, PBC and the Queensland Department of Housing.		
Continue to build relationships and work with the Traditional Owners from Papua New Guinea living on Saibai Island.		





"It's up to the community to solve its own problems. Service providers need to understand us and listen to us and then partner with us to achieve our healing and re-establish our ways ... our language, our lore, our culture."