

Guide to K'gari

We acknowledge the Butchulla People as the Traditional Custodians of K'gari and pay our deepest respects to Elders past, present and emerging. K'gari has been cared for by the Butchulla People since the beginning of the Dreaming — a responsibility and connection that continues today.

K'gari stretches over 123 kilometres in length and 22 kilometres at its widest point. With an area of 184 000 hectares, it is the largest sand island in the world and one of Australia's most extraordinary natural and cultural landscapes.

K'gari's World Heritage listing places it alongside Uluru, Kakadu and the Great Barrier Reef. It is a precious part of both Australia's natural heritage and the living cultural heritage of the Butchulla People, who have been its stewards since the beginning of the Dreaming.

K'gari is a place of exceptional beauty — long, uninterrupted white beaches flanked by strikingly coloured sand cliffs, over 100 freshwater lakes ranging from tea-dark to crystal-clear, and ancient rainforests growing from sand along the banks of fast-flowing creeks. It is a living, breathing ecosystem of global significance.

K'gari is the only place in the world where tall rainforests grow on sand dunes at elevations of over 200 metres. The low “wallum” heaths hold particular evolutionary and ecological significance, and produce spectacular wildflower displays each spring and summer.

The island's immense sand blows and coloured sand cliffs form the longest and most complete sequence of coastal dune systems in the world - a continuous geological record of climatic and sea level change spanning 700,000 years. The highest dunes reach 240 metres above sea level.

The earliest known name for the island is K'gari — a word from the Butchulla language (pronounced 'GUR-rie') meaning paradise. This name was officially reinstated by the Queensland Government on 7 June 2023, replacing the colonial name 'Fraser Island', which had been imposed following the 1836 shipwreck of Eliza Fraser. Returning the name was a significant act of recognition for the Butchulla People and their enduring connection to Country.

According to Butchulla creation story, the great god Beeral sent his messenger Yindingie with the spirit K'gari to create the land, mountains, rivers and sea. K'gari fell so deeply in love with the earth that she could not bear to leave. So Yindingie transformed her into an island of infinite beauty, kept company by forests, flowers, lakes, birds, animals and people — paradise.

A History of the Butchulla People on K'gari

The Butchulla People are the Traditional Custodians of K'gari. First Nations People have maintained a deep and continuous connection to this Country for more than 50,000 years - and since K'gari became an island over 6,000 years ago, the Butchulla People have lived here in close harmony with its seasons, landscapes and waterways.

First Nations People carefully protect many of their traditions, laws and ceremonies. Following European colonisation, much of the physical evidence of the Butchulla way of life was deliberately destroyed or lost through ignorance — a profound loss that the Butchulla community works to preserve and heal to this day.

Butchulla society was governed by a Council of Elders, whose authority encompassed both social and environmental law. The Council oversaw visitors to Country — granting or withholding permission to enter — and administered the totem system, by which each community member was assigned a plant or animal totem they were responsible for protecting. This system was not merely cultural; it functioned as a sophisticated, generations-old framework for ecological conservation.

Ceremonies such as initiation rites and corroborees were central to Butchulla life. Through storytelling, song, dance and music, traditions and knowledge were passed between generations. The K'gari people used an instrument called a bull roarer — distinct from the didgeridoo favoured by northern First Nations peoples — and women often accompanied music by rhythmically clapping their thighs.

K'gari supported large seasonal populations. During winter, when sea mullet were most plentiful, an estimated 2 000–3 000 people gathered on the island. Butchulla people travelled between K'gari and the mainland in bark canoes — crafted from a single sheet of bark sealed at each end with wax and resin — crossing the Great Sandy Strait with skill and confidence.

Wanggoolba Creek, which flows through what is now called Central Station, held deep cultural significance as a **birthing place** for Butchulla women. It remains a place of reverence. Visitors are asked to walk softly and with respect along its boardwalks.

European Contact and Colonisation

There is evidence that Europeans may have encountered K'gari's First Nations People more than 500 years ago. Lead identified as originating from the Iberian Peninsula was found near Hook Point, possibly linked to the 1521–22 Portuguese expedition of Cristóvão de Mendonça. Portuguese maps showing K'gari as an island survived in Britain and France, even after records were destroyed in the 1755 Lisbon earthquake.

In May 1770, Captain James Cook became the first recorded European to sight K'gari. Passing offshore, he observed a large gathering of Butchulla people on the volcanic headland they knew as Takky Wooroo — which Cook colonially renamed 'Indian Head', a name now also rendered as Tukkee Wurroo. It is a significant cultural site for the Butchulla People and is approached with respect.

In 1802, Matthew Flinders landed near Sandy Cape with Bongoree, a Port Jackson First Nations man. This is the first formally recorded interaction between First Nations People and Europeans on K'gari. Flinders noted the abundance and vitality of the island's people.

European colonisation brought devastating conflict. Butchulla clans resisted settlement, but were outmatched by firearms. In 1836, the shipwreck of the Stirling Castle brought Eliza Fraser to the island. Survivors were assisted by the Butchulla

People; however, Fraser's sensationalised and widely disputed accounts of 'savagery' incited fear and violence against First Nations People across the region. Her stories directly contributed to the massacre and dispossession of the Butchulla People — and for decades, the island bore her name as a lasting indignity.

In 1860, K'gari was gazetted as a First Nations Reserve, but this was rapidly reduced in 1863 as commercial logging expanded. By 1905, when the remaining reserve land was opened to timber-getters, almost all remaining Butchulla People were forcibly removed from their Country and transported to missions at Yarrabah (near Cairns) and Durundur (near Caboolture).

Conflict and disease had already taken a devastating toll: from an estimated population of thousands, only 435 Butchulla People remained by 1872, falling to 230 by 1880. The last were removed in 1904. Today, only a handful of direct descendants survive. Their history is inseparable from K'gari, and active efforts are underway to locate, recognise and protect cultural sites so that future generations can learn and honour the Butchulla way of life.

The Story of the SS Maheno

One of K'gari's most iconic landmarks is the rusting hull of the SS Maheno, beached on the eastern shore of 75 Mile Beach. Built in Scotland in 1905, she served as a luxury trans-Tasman passenger ship before being fitted out as a hospital ship for New Zealand during the Gallipoli Campaign of 1915, carrying badly wounded soldiers home across the Pacific.

After nearly 30 years of distinguished service, the Maheno was sold for scrap in 1935. En route to Japan, she was torn from her tow lines in a cyclone off the Queensland coast and driven ashore on K'gari on 9 July 1935. Attempts to refloat her failed, and she was left where she lay. During the Second World War she served as a RAAF bombing target.

Today, the Maheno's rusted hull lies slowly sinking into the sand about 10 kilometres north of Happy Valley — a striking reminder of the power of K'gari's natural forces, and a popular landmark for visitors travelling along 75 Mile Beach.

K'gari Highlights

K'gari's landscapes are among the most diverse and fragile on Earth. Visitors are asked to tread lightly, stay on designated tracks, and follow all national park guidelines to protect this irreplaceable World Heritage environment.

Eli Creek

One of the island's most beloved spots, Eli Creek is the largest freshwater creek on the eastern beach, pumping over four million litres of crystal-clear water into the ocean every hour. Wade upstream along the sandy creek bed, drift gently back to the beach on the current, or stroll the boardwalk watching for eels, frogs and small fish darting against the flow.

Boorangoora (Lake McKenzie)

Known to the Butchulla People as **Boorangoora** — meaning ‘waters of wisdom’ — this was traditionally a place of decision-making, where people gathered to listen for guidance from the spirit world. Today it is the most visited site on the island: a perched lake fed entirely by rainwater, fringed with paperbarks and pure white silica sand, its waters a vivid blue-green. Please help protect Boorangoora by not using sunscreen or insect repellent before swimming.

Wanggoolba Creek & Central Station

The historic forestry hub of Central Station sits at the island’s heart, where many walking tracks converge. **Wanggoolba Creek** — a sacred Butchulla birthing place — flows silently over pure white sand beneath a cathedral of ancient satinay trees and king ferns, the rarest ferns on Earth. Walk softly here; this is one of the most sacred and ecologically extraordinary places on K’gari.

Lake Wabby

The deepest lake on K’gari sits at the base of the golden Hammerstone Sandblow (known as Kirrar Sandblow in some Butchulla references), which is slowly advancing and will one day engulf the lake entirely. The drive to the ridge offers a spectacular lookout over the water and surrounding forest — a vivid reminder of K’gari’s ever-changing nature.

Tukkee Wurroo (Indian Head)

The volcanic headland the Butchulla People know as **Takky Wooroo / Tukkee Wurroo** is one of the most culturally significant sites on K’gari and a place of deep historical importance. It was here that a large gathering of Butchulla People watched Cook’s Endeavour pass in 1770. It is also remembered as a massacre site. Please visit with respect. The headland offers extraordinary views and is a renowned spot to observe dolphins, sharks, manta rays and humpback whales.

The Pinnacles – Coloured Sands

Along a 35-kilometre stretch of ocean beach north of Happy Valley, 72 distinct shades of ochre, red, yellow and cream create one of K’gari’s most striking visual spectacles. The coloured sands hold cultural significance for the Butchulla People, particularly for Butchulla women. Please do not remove sand — it is illegal and depletes this irreplaceable natural and cultural feature.

Maheno Shipwreck

The rusting remains of the SS Maheno, beached on 75 Mile Beach since 1935, are one of K’gari’s most photographed landmarks. The wreck changes colour and character throughout the day as the light shifts — best experienced at sunrise or golden hour.

Wongari (Dingoes)

K’gari is home to Australia’s most genetically pure population of **wongari** (dingoes) — a critically important wildlife population. Wongari are wild animals and must never be fed, approached or provoked. Feeding a wongari carries a maximum fine of \$27 538. Please follow all dingo-safe guidelines, secure your food at all times, and supervise children closely. Protecting the wongari is protecting K’gari.

Caring for K'gari

K'gari is a living World Heritage Area and the ancestral home of the Butchulla People. Every visitor shares in the responsibility of protecting it. Please:

- Stay on designated tracks and beach access points to protect fragile vegetation and dune systems.
- Carry out all rubbish — there are no bins in the national park.
- Do not collect shells, sand, plants or any natural or cultural material.
- Swim only at patrolled areas or with local knowledge of currents and marine life.
- Respect all culturally significant sites — some areas have restricted access in accordance with Butchulla law.
- Drive with care on the beach, observing all speed limits, and giving way to wildlife and pedestrians.
- Support Butchulla-owned and operated tourism businesses wherever possible.

K'gari means paradise. Let's keep it that way.