

STATEMENT BY SALTWATER TRADITIONAL OWNERS OF THE WOPPABURRA TUMRA REGION

Ensuring the well-being of Traditional Owners through physical, cultural and spiritual connection to country and continuing access to traditional resources

All areas off the Capricorn Coast covered by this TUMRA including mangroves, coral cays, the waters surrounding the islands and the islands themselves – are part of our traditional country. Our customary knowledge and practices, laws and identities as Woppaburra Traditional Owners are inter-connected with our land and sea country. Woppaburra sea country includes all the flood plains and coastal areas on the Keppel Islands between points approximately 7km eastward of Sandy Point to the north and 10 km eastward of Emu Park to the south, this includes all offshore islands and waters within this region of Queensland¹.

We are the Traditional Owners of the Keppel Islands and surrounding sea country and we speak for our land and sea country. North Keppel Island (Ko-no-mie – meaning “North Wind”) and Great Keppel Island (Woppa – meaning “Island”) were our main islands as recognised by state and federal governments, however our Elders referred to Woppaburra as ‘place of possums’. Our tribal name, Woppaburra, has also been interpreted as “Island People” or “People of the Island/s”. We had occupation over millennia however we travelled across the full range of our sea country. We also acknowledge that we are part of the larger Dharumbal language group and have long traded and interacted respectfully with our mainland brothers.

As Woppaburra people, we have a lifelong physical, cultural and spiritual connection to the land and sea. We have a lifelong responsibility to our ancestors to care for land and sea country. Our knowledge of the islands is intimate due to our ancestors who have passed down traditional knowledge of the islands and their natural resources, the seasons, the tides and ocean movements, the coastal flora and marine species. Our culture dictated the species and times we would be allowed to hunt and harvest by seasonal indicators. To this day, we as Traditional Owners, continue our traditional culture associated with hunting, fishing, harvesting and resource management practices handed down through our ancestors and traditional law. This includes ceremonies related to our sea country and traditional totems. The Humpback whale (Mugga-Mugga) is our primary totem and protector and is respected and not hunted by our people. The sea, its natural resources, and our identity as Traditional Owners, are inseparable.

Following European expansion onto our traditional country, many of our ancestors, our Elders and our relatives were forcibly removed from country and held in Aboriginal missions and reserves including Woodford, Bogimbah Creek and Yarrabah. Traditional Owners and Elders taken away from country have returned from these settlements and communities back to our traditional land and sea country to continue the strong cultural affiliation which has never been broken.

There are many important sites and places in this culturally and naturally rich region, including:

- story places (single and inter-connected)
- secret / sacred & ceremonial sites
- women’s & men’s sites
- fish traps
- rock shelter sites
- burial grounds
- middens
- fish spawning & other marine species breeding habitat
- camps & historic sites

These sites are significant cultural heritage places in their own right, providing evidence of use and habitation of the area by our people including Elders and our ancestors. Despite periodic disuse associated with the forced removal of our peoples, all of these places form integral elements of our cultural estates.

Our people live in two worlds. We understand that issues of protection are important for sustaining marine resources like turtle and dugong. However, it is also essential that Traditional Owners have secure access to traditional sea foods for both health and well-being. Law and custom determined our traditional eating habits for thousands of years and modern foods are often not suitable nor are they healthy for many of our people.

Lack of access to our traditional foods, including sea foods, contributes to the very high level of dietary disease and diabetes now affecting our communities. Our concerns about the health of our people are directly connected to the ability of our people to access our traditional country. Being healthy means looking after our spiritual health and our physical health. We are concerned not only about the protection of sites or species, but making sure that our own access to country and all its resources continues for all Woppaburra to engage with.

The relationship between Traditional Owners and sea country involves *rights* like the right to access sea country and to use its resources according to law and custom; *responsibilities* to our ancestors and important places on country; and *obligations* to our traditional land and sea country. Together with these rights, responsibilities and obligations to look after country, we as Traditional Owners must be able to maintain and pass on cultural knowledge, skills and practices, including knowledge about marine species now protected and proper sea country management. Our identity is closely tied to caring for places and being actively involved in looking after animals and plants on land and sea country. To do this we acknowledge that we must work with governments and other bodies to develop and implement the best possible management and monitoring practices.

As saltwater Traditional Owners we will continue to enjoy our customary rights in relation to our sea country and the resources gathered there. However, we know that protected species including turtles and dugongs are badly affected by noise levels of motorised sea craft, poaching, boat strike, destruction of sea grass habitat and other impacts. We will work with the GBRMPA and other marine management agencies to instigate measures to reduce this impact. However, we have the knowledge, as Traditional Owners, to manage our own hunting of turtle and dugong within our sea without reducing our customary or traditional rights.

We have come together as a saltwater Traditional Owner group of the Woppaburra country to decide to voluntarily control our take of turtle, dugong and other marine species under this agreement. Our decision also bans the hunting of these marine species in our sea country by other people who are not covered by this agreement.

We also care deeply about sea country’s water quality and will work towards limiting any further land or sea development and desire this to have no impact on our sea country and marine life in our traditional hunting and harvesting areas.

It is critical that Traditional Owners have recognised responsibilities and management roles for country, that we get active out on sea-country and that we can access traditional foods on country into the future. It is vital that government management agencies actively support Traditional Owners in creating real, meaningful management roles to meet our customary responsibilities to sea-country. This includes support for sea rangers, training or employment which will aid to improve the management of our sea country.

To this end, we welcome this approach by the GBRMPA to improve the management of our sea country in partnership with ourselves, the Saltwater Traditional Owners of the Woppaburra TUMRA region.

Woppaburra Traditional Owners

June 2013

¹ See specific co-ordinates Schedule 2 of Traditional Use of Marine Resources Agreement 2013 - 2023 (TUMRA)