

Kakadu report delayed by lockdowns after relationship fracture



Environment Minister Sussan Ley said she had been working hard to repair the relationship between traditional owners and Parks Australia.

By Cameron Gooley

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A report investigating how to fix the management of Australia's largest national park after a falling-out between the federal government and Aboriginal traditional owners has been delayed until at least the end of the year.

The Northern Territory's world heritage-listed Kakadu National Park has been jointly managed by the Bininj and Mungguy traditional owners and Parks Australia since the 1970s. But fractures in the relationship emerged publicly last year after the park's board of management passed a vote of no confidence in the federal agency.

A letter seen by Nine News showed the board had accused Parks Australia of a lack of communication with local groups, and criticised it over its "completely inadequate" handling of a helicopter crash in 2019, mishandling the park's reopening after the first COVID-19 lockdowns, and a series of fires that had caused more than \$1 million worth of damage.

Environment Minister Sussan Ley has told the *Herald* and *The Age* that she acknowledges the traditional owners were not respected nor fully involved by the government in the park's management.

"There was a big issue to address, we needed to do that. I was worried that we weren't keeping faith with the traditional owners," she said.

During a visit last year, Ms Ley said she was convinced by traditional owners that their concerns were genuine, and made immediate changes including moving key executive staff from Canberra to Darwin, appointing a traditional owner as one of two new park managers, and increasing the number of members on the Kakadu board of management from 15 to 21.

She also established a senior advisory group, headed by former Indigenous affairs minister Amanda Vanstone and acting Northern Land Council chief executive Joe Martin-Jard, to re-assess the park's joint management model.

The group was to deliver its findings in the latter half of this year, but Ms Ley has confirmed it couldn't do so until at least the end of 2021 due to pandemic-related travel restrictions.

"We want to take extra care when visiting vulnerable traditional owner communities and if there's a hint that it's not going to be safe, then we don't do it," she said.

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Ms Ley left the door open to eventually handing total control back to traditional owners and said she would accept whatever recommendations the group made.

"Effectively, I said to them, I have no preconceived idea or wish for what you find, but I do want you to make this a genuine fact-finding mission," she said.

While admitting last year's blowout had pushed the relationship between Aboriginal groups and the government to its limit, Ms Ley pledged to ensure the partnership would never reach that point again.

"I'm not going to say the relationship is broken ... I think it was strained to breaking point, but I think every step that's been taken since then has been a step in restoring the relationship."