

Kakadu traditional owners demand bureaucrat resign



Visitors relaxing at Gunlom in Kakadu National Park. Picture: Tourism NT/James Fisher

- Amos Aikman
- 3 July 2020

A brawl has erupted in Kakadu over allegedly false claims by a bureaucrat about the behaviour of an Aboriginal “landlord”, the bungled response to a recent helicopter crash and several dangerous fires.

The chairwoman of the iconic national park’s board of management issued a statement late on Friday calling for the federal national parks director, an assistant secretary and the local park manager to resign.

Maria Lee said the board had made a “unanimous decision of board members present” to declare no confidence in the three senior public servants and to ask Environment Minister Sussan Ley to intervene.

The Environment Department responded that Ms Ley had asked it to “urgently prepare a report on the issues raised so that she can assess both perspectives.”

Ms Lee’s statement said Aboriginal board members had “for some time now ... had growing concerns about the way in which the board of management is engaged and consulted by Parks Australia”.

It went on to cite the destruction by fire of park facilities and objects of historical and cultural significance, a lack of employment opportunities for traditional owners and problems with a report into the helicopter crash in 2019.

The statement said the guiding principles of Kakadu's agreed management plan for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people to work together were "not currently being met."

In a letter dated 1 July, senior traditional owner and Kakadu board member Jonathan Nadji denied making threats at a community meeting, as he claimed one top bureaucrat had wrongly alleged.

"I am effectively one of your landlords," Mr Nadji wrote. "Unlike me and my successors, you are temporarily passing through."

He said traditional owners thought Kakadu management was at an all-time low and added in closing that, "I would strongly suggest you cease your campaign to discredit and or demonise me personally ... it will ... not address the real problems of Kakadu".

Another document provided claimed rangers had "serious issues with Kakadu National Park management" and its "holier than thou" attitude.

A spokeswoman said Parks Australia "values and respects the longstanding joint management relationship it has with the traditional owners of Kakadu."

"The Minister wants to ensure that the issues are properly addressed and that Parks Australia can continue to work collaboratively with the Traditional Owners in managing the park," she said.

Spokespeople for Minister Ley and Indigenous Australians Minister Ken Wyatt did not respond to invitations to comment.