

BY GABRIELLE CHAN

# Killing Kokoda

With 3000 trekkers expected this year, a new conflict is brewing along that icon of World War II heroism, the Kokoda Track.

**G**ALLIPOLI REMAINS AUSTRALIA'S iconic battlefield, but the Kokoda Track has been quietly attracting an increasing number of trekkers. They are drawn to the precipitous 96km strip in Papua New Guinea's Owen Stanley Range for many reasons. Its jungle holds the secrets of the Kokoda campaign, arguably the nation's most compelling war story, fought by Australians on Australian territory in defence of Australia.

There are those who crave the physical and mental challenge, the rite-of-passage trekkers, and those who wish to connect with family members who fought in PNG. There are the celebrities, the eco-tourists, the leadership teams and the corporate workshops. But this growing traffic is exposing many potential threats that could endanger the track and the villages that rely on it as a pathway to market and for crucial tourist income.

The next battle at Kokoda is over how to manage the track so that its historical, environmental and cultural significance is not lost, while providing a livelihood for its 14 subsistence villages, home to descendants

of the "Fuzzy Wuzzy Angels" who were so crucial to Australia's victory in 1942.

*The Bulletin's* Helen Pitt went to Kokoda in 1992 with the NSW parliamentarian Charlie Lynn on one of his first treks. In that 50th anniversary year of the battle, there were fewer than 100 tourists walking the track. Following Pitt's cover story, Lynn started a trekking business and established the Kokoda Track Foundation, dedicated to supporting the Koiari and Orokaivean people for their wartime sacrifices.

Last year, I trekked Kokoda with Lynn, who by then had traversed it 36 times. By the end of 2004, numbers had jumped to more than 1600 visitors annually. PNG Tourism Promotion Authority chief executive Peter Vincent is expecting 3000 trekkers this year.

Eighteen months ago, the track was as wild as one would expect of such sparsely populated rainforest. In July, a return visit showed that the 21st century is closing in. War detritus still dots the jungle, but logging has begun within four kilometres of the track.

Last year, the track was silent but for the panting, grunting and groaning of trekkers

and the occasional call of a bird of paradise. This year, the din of heavy machinery could be heard as we negotiated the relentless downhill steps of the portion known as "Jap's Ladder", for its series of weapons pits. The South Pacific Minerals Mt Bini gold exploration project, just 1km east of the track, was in full cry. Helicopters flew overhead, airlifting supplies, which cater for between 20 and 30 local employees. The villagers were keen to approve the project in return for the extension of an old war-time road.

Jap's Ladder leads down to Ofi Creek. Eighteen months ago, it was pristine with a deep clear waterhole. We filled water bottles upstream and swam downstream. When I attempted to take the plunge last month, my guide cautioned me against it, citing the pollution from Mt Bini.

Exploration manager for South Pacific Minerals, Peter Ruzicka, confirms drilling is taking place a kilometre from the track but denies it is polluting the creek. He says the company is yet to decide whether a mine is viable.

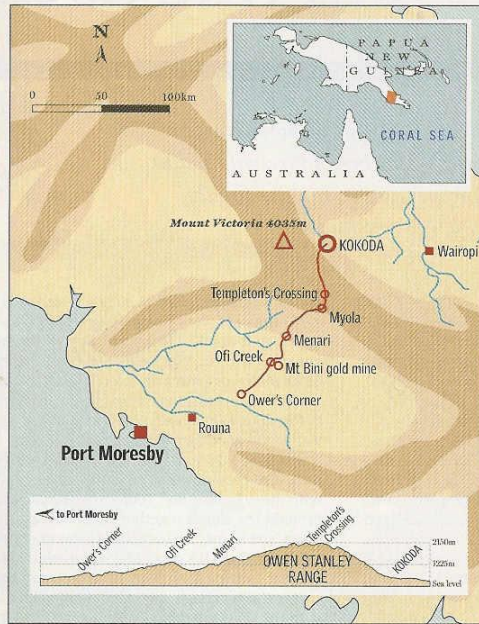
Drilling notwithstanding, the waterhole has been partially filled in by traditional landowners. They have shored up the bank to build a bridge so trekkers don't get their boots wet crossing the creek. The steep

RICHARD HUIET



### KOKODA TRIAL

Trekkers arrive at the Ofi Creek campsite, left; the rising number of visitors is putting pressure on villages and the environment



walls of the ravine that created Ofi Creek have been retained with large logs, and a pit toilet for tourists has been sunk on the shores of the swimming hole.

Halfway up the Port Moresby side, a camping ground has been cut out of the side of the ravine, with huge rainforest trees cut off just above their magnificent buttress roots. The landowner's family sat on the front porch of their hut, a mother feeding a newborn baby, as she watched the tourists settle in for the night. We provide their only income.

I sat in the clear-felled campsite with fellow trekker Stephen Wearing, an associate professor at the University of Technology, Sydney, who is working on the sustainable tourism strategy for the newly established Kokoda Track Authority (KTA). He outlined the worst case scenario: "The rainforest on this site can regenerate. If the upper catchment areas become infected, that would be worse. There is also the social impact of a lot of tourists going through the villages. And the fact that the highly sensitive wetland environments will not recover from too much trekking."

A report by Paul Chatterton of the World Wildlife Fund, describes the Owen Stanley Range and the larger South-East Papua Rainforest Ecoregion as "globally

## THE STRATEGY WILL ONLY BE SUSTAINABLE IF MANAGED BY LOCALS. THE TRACK AUTHORITY HAS A COLONIAL APPROACH //

RUTH DICKER, NIUGINI HOLIDAYS

outstanding". Because of its huge climatic range – from hot and humid to a much cooler high-altitude climate – the mountains support rainforest, savannah, subalpine herbs and grasslands.

It was the rainforest and its boot-sucking mud that the Diggers remembered most vividly, and it remains the overwhelming image of the Kokoda Track. Less well-known is the fragile grassland on the extinct volcano bed of Myola, where the "biscuit bombers" dropped Australian supplies which disappeared in the mud. Or the fairytale moss forests beyond Myola, where the Australians took advantage of the soft forest floor to dig ammunition dumps.

These micro-climates within the one mountain system support 4000 plant species: more

than the entire World Heritage-listed wet tropic rainforests of northern Queensland.

The track was designated a "protected area" in PNG, even though the reserve itself covers just a 10m wide strip. Chatterton's assessment is that, as a protection system, the reserve is not working. He has joined Lynn in a call for the track to be declared a national memorial park.

The KTA brings together the Kokoda and Koiari local governments to promote tourism, collect and direct trekking revenue and organise development along the track. It has members from villages, the PNG National Cultural Commission, the PNG Tourism Promotion Authority and the Port Moresby branch of the RSL.

Its strategy will include creating standards for tour operators such as conditions for porters, the social impact of trekkers on the villages, hygiene and the size of trekking groups.

The major change under consideration is the collection and administration of trekking fees. These range from 100 Kina (\$43) for PNG citizens to K200 for international trekkers. Three rangers will be employed to check trekking permits – with the power to halt those without – and maintain relations with villages for the KTA.

But the authority does not have the full support of track residents, nor Australian tour operators. Ruth Dicker, of Niugini Holidays, the original tour operator for the track, is refusing to pay her fees until the money goes straight to the local level. "[The strategy] will only be truly sustainable when it is managed by the people," she says. "[The KTA] has a colonial approach."

Garry Imiri, a KTA member from Menari village, says management is being guided by local people along the track, not outsiders. "When this KTA concept was introduced, everyone likes it but everyone wants to handle the money," he says. "The KTA had to administer the money. It's always hard with a developing area: you have got to start somewhere and show people we are worthy of support. We are using that money for the people's projects and the people can see that."

Vincent says the KTA was established by an act of PNG parliament and he would use the community development model for other areas of the country. He expects the Kokoda Track business to keep growing, allowing the villages to earn an income from tourism without turning to other developments such as mining and logging.

"We are currently working on a memorandum of understanding with the World Bank to gain extra funding to rehabilitate facilities and put in proper toilets, hot showers and more guest houses. We cannot stop development, but we have to manage it properly." ●

Gabrielle Chan is the author of *War on Our Doorstep* (Hardie Grant) based on 1942 war diaries from the Pacific, and *Flickers of History* (HarperCollins)