



KOKODA

Aborigines cry hypocrisy as we worry about PNG but mine local sacred grounds



The development battle over Papua New Guinea's Kokoda Track is absolute hypocrisy, claim local Aborigines, who have seen their sacred sites ripped apart. **Maria Noakes** reports

AUSTRALIA'S opposition to the proposed mining of 600m of the Kokoda Track is hypocritical, say Aborigines who have seen their own sacred sites desecrated by the rush to dig up WA's mineral deposits.

There has been an outcry in Australia over moves to mine a stretch of the famous Papua New Guinea track, which saw bitter fighting between the Australian and Japanese armies in World War II.

Prime Minister Kevin Rudd has led the protests. "Australia is determined to preserve the track," a spokesman for Mr Rudd said.

But Gumala Aboriginal Corporation committee member Keith Lethbridge said the Government's willingness to desecrate indigenous Australian sites, while "pointing the finger at our neighbouring countries", was completely

unreasonable.

"They should let them (the PNG Government) have autonomy and they should be able to make their own decisions," Mr Lethbridge said.

"They are asking a country that doesn't have as much money as Australia to forgo the financial benefits that the mine could offer."

Frontier Resources has offered PNG villagers a 5 per cent stake in the \$6.7 billion gold and copper deposit the company has been exploring along the Kokoda Track. It could potentially lift many locals out of poverty.

Mr Lethbridge believed it was not up to the Australian Government to dictate what the PNG Government could and couldn't do.

"It's very hypocritical," he said. "They haven't done the right thing by us, we're getting totally desecrated."



WATCH YOUR STEP: A trekking group battles the elements while taking on Kokoda.

After negotiations with BHP, a 10,000-year-old stone arrangement in the Milyuranpa Banjyma region of the Pilbara was relocated.

“They (the Government) had no respect in regards to our cultural beliefs,” Mr Lethbridge said.

Earlier this month, the controversial relocation of Aboriginal rock carvings from the Pluto facilities site on the Burrup Peninsula in WA was completed.

The Burrup Peninsula and the Dampier Archipelago have an estimated one million carvings up to 30,000 years old.

Mr Lethbridge described the rock carvings as a dictionary for the past and present.

“The Government gave the authority to move the rocks like they were transportable homes,” he said.

Last year, the Howard Government contributed \$15.9 million to preserve the Kokoda Track and have it listed as a World Heritage site.

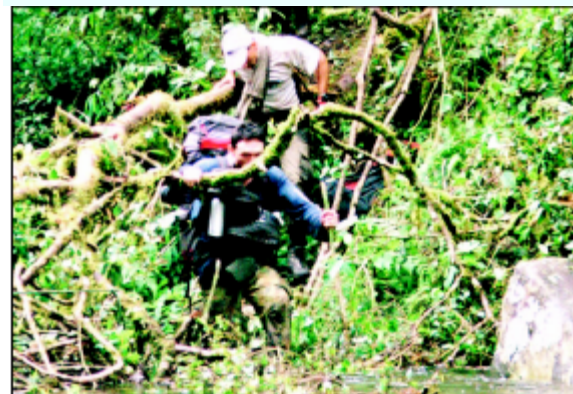
In 2007, about 5000 Australians walked the track, injecting about \$9.5 million into the PNG economy.

Kimberley Land Council executive director Wayne Bergman said history and symbolism played an important part in all people’s lives.

“Historic sites, whether they relate to indigenous or non-indigenous people, resonate with people’s spirits,” he said. “A level-headed and reasonable approach is required when these sites come under pressure.

“The rights of indigenous people to determine their own futures must be acknowledged. This includes cultural and environmental protections, as well as economic opportunity.

“Working out the best approach to these issues requires a transparent process, which provides for free and informed decisions.”



NOT EASY: Trekkers struggle through the jungle along the Kokoda Trek.