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*Article rank* | 8 Jan 2021 | *The Cairns Post* | *CHRIS CALCINO*

# THE SAD END OF TJAPUKAI

COVID-19 seals fate of Australia's leading Indigenous experience

COVID-19 restrictions and international border closures have led to the shutdown of Australia's largest Indigenous tourism experience, Tjapukai.

for last time



Tjapukai's building at Smithfield, and (Inset) dancers perform at the opening of the redevelopment in 2015.

TTNQ chairman Ken Chapman – whose family owns Skyrail Rainforest Cableway directly next door to Tjapukai – said it was a tough but understandable decision given the uncertainty around international and domestic tourism.

“This demonstrates just how hard it is for businesses that are successful in the international market to continue trading,” he said.

“It also reinforces why tourism businesses need on-

going support to tackle the challenges ahead.”

In 2018-19, 424,000 visitors took part in an Indigenous experience tourism in Queensland, supporting \$505m in visitor expenditure and 2500 full-time jobs.

A Tourism and Events Queensland report in 2018-19 said 73 per cent of Indigenous tourism businesses were optimistic for business growth, although less than half were making a profit and 31 per cent broke even.



Former Tjapukai general manager David Hudson.

**Tjapukai's building at Smithfield, and (inset) dancers perform at the opening of the redevelopment in 2015.**

The award-winning venue at Smithfield has been struggling for years under dwindling patronage and it temporarily closed 10 months ago.

Tjapukai director Cronje Wolvaardt said staff were informed on Thursday that the business would not be reopening.

But one of the founders, Judy Freeman, lashed out at its owners, the Australia Government's Indigenous Business Australia. THE Cairns tourism industry is reeling after one of its biggest attractions announced it was shutting down for good after 33 years in operation.

Tjapukai Aboriginal Cultural Park has been in a financial slide for years but has always managed to keep its head above water and maintain a position as a Far North tourism icon.

It temporarily closed in March after COVID-19 ended international visitation, but there was every intention to reopen when market conditions improved.

The Smithfield attraction was one of three Commonwealth-owned Indigenous subsidiaries to share in \$19.8m of federal coronavirus bailout funding in the October budget.

But even a dollar figure with six zeros was not enough to save it from the chopping block.

Indigenous Business Australia investment and asset management director Cronje Wolvaardt told the Cairns Post that staff were informed about the closure on Thursday.

"The closure of Tjapukai wasn't a decision made lightly or quickly," he said.

"We have been seeing declining patronage for many years.

"Tjapukai has considered various options to continue to revitalise and grow the operations, however the business has continued to remain marginal in the face of a challenging tourism market.

"COVID-19 has compounded these economic challenges, as it has for many industries and sectors."

The shutdown is devastating for the Aboriginal people of the region – not least cofounder and renowned artist David Hudson.

Tjapukai's inception with a with a capital base of \$45,000 at Kuranda in 1987 and eventual shift to its current sprawling home at Smithfield was seen as revolutionary at the time.

It had always been at the leading edge of cultural tourism – and something that seemed new but was anything but.

"We were the original botanists, we're the traditional astronomers – we've been doing tourism for over 50,000 years," Mr Hudson said.

"It was hard work but we proved that we were an entity that could survive," he said.

"We survived the plane strikes (in 1989), Ansett going bust after 9/11, we stuck to our guns. This is really disheartening."

Mr Hudson said he hoped the building would be retained for cultural tourism purposes, although its future hangs in the balance books.

Mr Wolvaardt said Tjapukai had attracted more than three million visitors and contributed more than \$40m to the local community in wages, royalties and the purchase and commissioning of art and artefacts over the years.

"Throughout its history Tjapukai has been a strong employer of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, consistently achieving over 65 per cent Indigenous employment," he said.

"We are proud of the history of Tjapukai, which is seen as an icon of Indigenous tourism in Far North Queensland and has contributed so much to the sector."

Workers will be provided support with "comprehensive career transition support, including training, mentoring and the provision of post placement services with the assistance of a local service provider".

"Tjapukai will work with the traditional owners regarding the future of the site," Mr Wolvaardt said.

Tourism Tropical North Queensland chief executive Mark Olsen said the industry's thoughts were with the staff of Tjapukai.

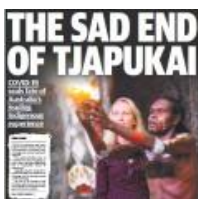
"This will be a really difficult time for the staff, both past and present, who have made an enormous contribution to showcasing Indigenous tourism over the past 33 years," he said. "The closure of Tjapukai is a great loss to the tourism industry as it is a foundation product that set the benchmark for Indigenous cultural tourism experiences in Australia."

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