

**THE BOULDERS BABINDA – SAFETY REVIEW ACTIONS**

73/2/34-01 | #7325543

**RECOMMENDATION:**

That Council notes the update provided in this report.

---

**INTERESTED PARTIES:**

The following interested parties have been identified for this request:

Oliver Fearman, Safety Circle  
Wanyurr Majay Traditional Owners  
Queensland National Parks and Wildlife Service  
Queensland Fire and Emergency Services  
State Emergency Services  
Queensland Police Service

*Note: The identification of interested parties is provided on a best endeavours basis by Council Officers and may not be exhaustive.*

**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:**

This report seeks to provide an update on the progress of the Babinda Boulders Safety Implementation Plan. It has now been 12 months since being endorsed by Council and a working group of various officers and community stakeholders have undertaken numerous actions to meet the goals outlined in the plan.

**BACKGROUND:**

The Boulders, Babinda is a popular and well improved destination attracting tourists and locals for recreation purposes. Council made a range of improvements to the site in 2017, including improving accessibility to the main swimming area, upgrading the car park, and providing new pathways, signage, and fencing.

Tragically, the site has a history of people losing their lives in the dangerous sections of the creek, in the vicinity of the viewing areas located on the path to the Devil's Pool lookout and lower lookout. There have been 21 recorded deaths since 1916, with 3 occurring in 2020/2021.

To address tragedies occurring at the site, Council made consistent changes at the site over the past decade in the interest of making the site safer. Actions to improve safety included:

- 2010 No Go Zone introduced covering the high-risk area at the Devil's Pool, The Chute and the Washing Machine.

- 2014 Site Master Plan endorsed for significant improvements.
- 2015 Aquatic safety risk assessment/audit - 16 new/updated signs.
- 2016 Updated Local Laws – permanent NO GO ZONE around the Devil’s Pool, The Chute and Washing Machine.
- 2017 Improvements to safe swimming area providing easier access and use of large safe swimming area to deter need to swim elsewhere.
- 2017 Refurbished elevated decks/walkways, new additional fencing to lookouts/track further restricting access to unsafe areas.
- 2017 Extensive and additional warning signs along trail & lookouts.
- 2020 Additional fencing provided along pathway and lookouts to restrict access further.
- 2021/2022 Site maintenance to close informal trails – ongoing.
- 2022 Extra fencing panels on edges of existing lookouts and boardwalks installed.
- 2022 Locked gates provided at targeted locations to enable fast access for emergency service for rescue operations.

In 2022, Council engaged a consultant to complete a review into drowning risks at the Boulders with recommendations to improve safety. Council endorsed the findings of the review and the associated implementation plan on 25 January 2023.

### **COMMENT:**

The Safety Implementation Plan was developed to respond to four key directions outlined in the Babinda Boulders Safety Review. A summary of actions undertaken to date according to each direction is as follows:

- **Measuring Success.** This involves data collection and visitor engagement improvements. Data is collected at the site using traffic counters to assist in providing information on the number of people using the site, when they are using the site (times and days) and how long they are using the site for. The data is used to inform which times and days are most used, which helps guide enforcement. Visitor engagement is also an important component; officers attend the site to educate the public about dangers and safe swimming options.

Traffic counters were installed on two separate occasions in 2023 over several months. In both instances, data showed the site had high visitation between 9am and 4pm on most days, with numbers increasing on school holidays and weekends.

- **Corrective Measures.** These are educational, factual, visual, warning and information signage to convey important messages about dangers and risks to the most ‘at risk’ group. These measures also include site communication improvements (phone coverage), No Go Zone emergency access, No Go Zone preventative access, enforcement, and alternative safe swimming areas.

A suite of signage was rolled out from the day facility and along the pathway to the Devils Pool and lower lookout (Attachment 1). The signs focused on advising people of the number, age and gender of deaths at the site, as well as visual and written explanation of the mechanics of the Chute and Devils Pool where most deaths occur. The signs also show safe swimming areas that tourists might not be aware of (e.g., The Hippy Pool) and also clearly highlight the No Go Zone.

A gate was introduced for emergency services near the lower lookout to assist in accessing the No Go Zone faster during emergencies. Fencing was also improved near the lookouts and dangerous areas to help prevent access by the public from the pathway into the No Go Zone. Informal trails accessing the No Go Zone are rapidly identified and infilled.

Council officers have been liaising with telecommunication companies to consider the range of potential communication options for the site. Due to the steep terrain, significant vegetation, and distance from existing services in Babinda, the cost to provide phone coverage and CCTV connection at the No Go Zone area has been estimated to be approximately \$2 million. Council has investigated alternative communication possibilities and 2 Starlink services from Telstra are to be installed at the site, with one at the car park and one at the lower viewing platform near The Chute. These services will enable mobile communication from the car park and the lower lookout (which presently do not exist), which will vastly improve emergency response times.

Council officers and the Police regularly attend the site with increased Council staff presence on most weekdays and Police attending on both weekdays and weekends.

Council officers are recording breaches of the No Go Zone to determine if there are patterns when this is occurring. This assists in undertaking enforcement and educational activities to ensure the site is being used safely.

Monitoring of the site by Police and Council officers will be ongoing indefinitely to ensure a presence is maintained, enforcement action can be taken where breaches occur, and the public are aware of risks and penalties. These incidents will continue to be recorded by Council so that data can be used to assist Council officers in monitoring, enforcement and awareness activities.

- **Education and Engagement Campaign.** This involves providing better safety messaging in the community, using various methods, particularly social media, print, radio and television to communicate messages about risks. Signage at the site informs of risks, explains what the dangers are, where they occur and how to avoid them.

Council has consistently undertaken targeted media releases about the site around school holidays and other peak times to maintain public awareness of the dangers at the site (Attachment 2). Council's website and Facebook page has been updated and tools have been used to ensure that when a simple search of The Boulders is made on a search engine, that the Council webpage information is more prominent.

An education package is being developed for schools and the general public relating to safety in all natural areas, including The Boulders.

Signage has been greatly improved at the site and many people have commented on its impact on their understanding of the dangers to be avoided.

Staff that undertake enforcement also have been talking to the general public and educating them about the site.

- **Risk Management Framework.** Ongoing consultation, collaboration and coordination with regional rescue coordinators regularly is important. A risk register that lists all incidents and hazards at the site to assist in managing risks has been established. The use of iAuditor is also an effective tool used to record of incidents and breaches of the No Go Zone

Council is represented on the regional safety committee which is a group of representatives from emergency services and includes police officers, SES, QFES, and QPWS. These meetings are important for all stakeholders to discuss and resolve issues.

Council established an internal working group that regularly meets to discuss actions and issues at the site to ensure a consistent and constant approach to safety at the site remains in place.

It is noted that the upcoming Aquatic Strategy will review safety in other natural areas where significant safety risks occur to the public. The findings, learnings and outcomes from The Boulders Safety Review will be applied to the Aquatic Strategy to maximise key learning outcomes from this process across all relevant natural areas.

### **OPTIONS:**

Option 1 (recommended):

That Council notes the update provided in this Report.

Option 2:

The Council requests further information regarding The Boulders, Babinda.

### **CONSIDERATIONS:**

#### **Risk Management:**

Council is committed to mitigating risks at The Boulders, Babinda and will continue to implement actions identified in the safety review as part of ongoing operations.

#### **Council Finance and the Local Economy:**

The Boulders is one of the most well promoted and popular tourist attractions in the region. It provides a significant financial boost for the Babinda economy from tourists and locals visiting the site and the area.

The capital cost to make the changes that have been implemented to this point is largely for signage and additional fencing at a cost of \$12,000. There will be a minor increase to operational costs associated with the Starlink service and no change to ongoing, site specific management and maintenance costs.

### Community and Cultural Heritage:

The Boulders is a culturally significant place for Aboriginal people. When consulting with Traditional Owners, they expressed concerns with people losing their lives at The Boulders and have given strong endorsement for Councils actions to improve safety for visitors and keep people away from the Devils Pool.

### Natural Environment:

The changes made to the site to improve safety have no adverse impact on the environment.

### Corporate and Operational Plans:

The actions undertaken to improve safety at The Boulders strongly align with the vision and values of the Corporate Plan, particularly Focus Area 3 - Designing for Liveability, creating a safe, sustainable and connected place that supports quality of life.

### **CONSULTATION:**

The initial review involved extensive community engagement over several months, including with the Babinda and wider community as well as key local and regional stakeholders.

### **ATTACHMENTS:**

Attachment 1: Warning, educational and safety signage installed at The Boulders.

Attachment 2: Examples of social media posts



Tim Dendle  
Executive Manager Community Spaces



Destry Puia  
Director Lifestyle and Community



# Attachment 1: Warning, educational and safety signage installed at The Boulders





## The Boulders

**21 PEOPLE HAVE DIED  
IN THIS AREA**

### Deaths at The Devil's Pool and The Chute since 1965:

1965 - Male, 17	1991 - Male, 21
1967 - Male, 20	2004 - Male, 32
1972 - Male, 23	2006 - Male, age unknown
1978 - Male, 31	2008 - Male, 23
1979 - Male, 23	2020 - Female, 18
1980 - Male, 22	2020 - Male, 37
1983 - Male, 25	2021 - Female, 19
1989 - Female, 44	

There were a further six deaths recorded before 1965.

THIS AREA IS PATROLLED BY QLD POLICE OFFICERS AND  
AUTHORISED COUNCIL OFFICERS WHO WILL DIRECT  
YOU TO LEAVE THE NO-GO ZONE. FINES APPLY.

 Cairns  
COUNCIL





### The Boulders

#### WARNING: NO-GO ZONE

This is an extremely dangerous area. DO NOT enter under any circumstances.



People drown by getting pulled down and under the rocks and branches where they become pinned from the weight of the water being forced down on them.



People become trapped in The Chute by being forced into the underwater caves and cavities.



Suction created by the turbulent spinning waters in The Washing Machine makes it extremely difficult to swim against and reach the surface.

THIS AREA IS PATROLLED BY OLD POLICE OFFICERS AND AUTHORISED COUNCIL OFFICERS WHO WILL DIRECT YOU TO LEAVE THE NO-GO ZONE. FINES APPLY.







# The Boulders

## THE HIDDEN DANGERS

This is how people drown in The Devil's Pool and The Chute.

Don't make the mistake of being fooled by these seemingly calm waters!!!

21 people have died in this area. They died because they didn't know how dangerous the waters underneath are. It might look safe, but one slip into the water could mean you won't be rescued and it will take three days to recover your body.

There are multiple drowning hazards in these waters that kill people. Airation in the water prevents you from floating. Rocks, concrete, undercuts and underwater channels drag you into them where you get caught and can't escape.

The Chute is 1.2 metres wide but is 10 metres deep and there is a series of underwater caves, crevices and holes that drop you in, you can't find your way out. It is full of rock and is pitch dark. Combined with the weight of the water, drowning is almost certain. The force and direction of the water above you prevents you from rising to the surface. If you get sucked into the water, there is no way you can get out.

The rock that led next to The Devil's Pool and The Chute is very slippery. One slip into The Chute or The Devil's Pool could kill you. This is how most people die here.



People drown by getting pulled down and under rocks and concrete where they become pinned from the weight of the water being forced down on them.




People become trapped in THE CHUTE by being forced into the underwater caves and crevices.

THIS AREA IS PATROLLED BY QLD POLICE OFFICERS AND AUTHORISED COUNCIL OFFICERS WHO WILL DIRECT YOU TO LEAVE THE NO-GO ZONE. FINES APPLY.





## Attachment 2: Examples of social media posts

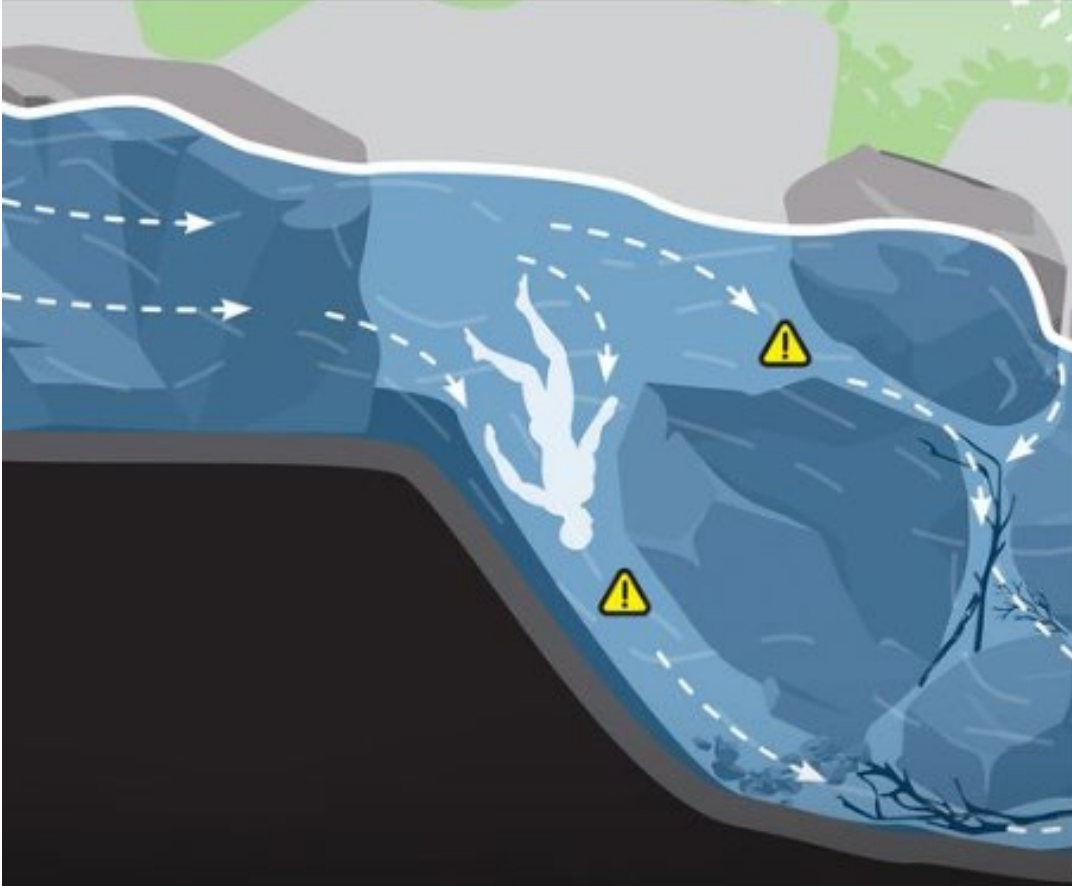
 Cairns Regional Council  
Published by Sprout Social · April 4, 2023 · 🌐

⚠️ **It's not worth the risk**


There are several locations at the Babinda Boulders where hidden dangers sit beneath the surface. Fast-flowing water combined with large rocks, caves and channels can be dangerous to swimmers.

Warning signs are in place to keep you safe. Only swim in designated swimming areas.

Commitment to f... See more



**Beware  
the hidden dangers at  
Babinda Boulders**

 Cairns  
REGIONAL COUNCIL

👍 1.1K 344 comments 725 shares

👍 Like    💬 Comment    📧 Send    ➦ Share





Cairns Regional Council

Published by Sprout Social - February 2, 2023

...

'The Chute' is the most dangerous area at The Boulders. More than half of all recorded deaths at The Boulders happened here.

On the surface, it's 1m – 2m wide stream. Underneath, it's a 8m – 10m deep crevice with openings, caves, gouges, boulders and river debris.

Visitors underestimate the risks

Council conducted a survey i... See more



**At Babinda Boulders,  
most drownings happened  
at "The Chute"**



👍👎 253

87 comments 198 shares