
JURISDICTION : CORONER'S COURT OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA
ACT : CORONERS ACT 1996
CORONER : Robyn Mary Hartley, Coroner
HEARD : 26 JUNE 2026
DELIVERED : 10 AUGUST 2026
FILE NO/S : CORC 1496 of 2025
DECEASED : KARAKAUA, MONITAKE STARR

Catchwords:

Nil

Legislation:

Nil

Counsel Appearing:

Counsel Assisting : Senior Constable Craig ROBERTSON

Catchwords:

Nil

Legislation and Subsidiary Legislation:

Coroners Act 1996 (WA)

Conservation and Land Management Regulations 2002 (WA)

Counsel Appearing:

Snr Const Craig ROBERTSON assisted the Coroner

Case(s) referred to in decision(s):

Inquest into the suspected death of Jiaolong ZHANG & death of Chunjun LI
[2017] WACOR 44

Coroners Act 1996
(Section 26(1))

RECORD OF INVESTIGATION INTO DEATH

*I, Robyn Mary Hartley, Coroner, having investigated the disappearance of **Monitake Starr KARAKAUA** with an inquest held at Perth Coroners Court, Central Law Courts, Court 85, 501 Hay Street, PERTH, on 26 June 2026, find that the death of **Monitake Starr KARAKAUA** has been established beyond all reasonable doubt and that the identity of the deceased person was **Monitake Starr KARAKAUA** and that death occurred on or about 25 April 2025 in the ocean off Salmon Holes Beach, Salmon Hole Road, Torndirrup National Park in the following circumstances:*

Table of Contents

INTRODUCTION 3

BACKGROUND 3

SALMON HOLES..... 4

LIFEJACKETS FOR RECREATIONAL FISHERS 4

EVENTS OF 25 APRIL 2025 6

SEARCH AND RESCUE OPERATION 7

Time Frame for Survival 7

RESPONSE TO MR KARAKAUA’S DISAPPEARANCE 8

ANALYSIS..... 9

CONCLUSION 10

INTRODUCTION

1. Monitake Starr Karakaua (Mr Karakaua) was 29 years old when he was last seen alive on 25 April 2025 in the ocean off a notorious rock fishing location at Salmon Holes in the Torndirrup National Park south of Albany.
2. Mr Karakaua was swept from the rocks into the ocean while fishing with friends and family during an Anzac Day holiday. Numerous witnesses observed his struggle in the water before he disappeared beneath the surface. He was wearing a lifejacket that he appeared unable to inflate. It is not known whether this was due to the lifejacket malfunctioning or Mr Karakaua not succeeding in inflating it.
3. A substantial air, sea and land search commenced immediately and continued for six days. Despite extensive efforts, no trace of Mr Karakaua has ever been found.
4. Following investigation by the Western Australia Police Force (WAPF), it was determined there was reasonable cause to suspect Mr Karakaua had died and that the circumstances of his disappearance required coronial investigation.
5. I held an inquest at the Perth Coroner's Court on 26 June 2026. The inquest consisted of the tendering of documentary evidence compiled during the investigation into Mr Karakaua's disappearance, supplemented by oral evidence from Senior Constable Fazio who prepared the report into the suspected death. I was also assisted by information provided to the Court by Recfishwest, a not-for-profit organisation representing the interests of Western Australian recreational fishers.
6. Mr Karakaua's wife moved back to Fiji after his disappearance so was unable to attend the inquest. I was grateful to Pastor Heard from the church Mr Karakaua and his family attended during their time in Katanning for his presence at the inquest.

BACKGROUND

7. Mr Karakaua was born in Fiji on 29 August 1995 and grew up with his three older brothers. He was known as Moni to family and friends.

8. He met his wife, Tongauea, in 2013 while at high school and they married on 5 April 2015. The couple had a daughter and a son together. While she did not know at the time of her husband's disappearance, Mrs Karakaua was in the early stages of pregnancy with their third child and has since welcomed a baby girl.
9. To better provide for his family, Mr Karakaua migrated to Australia in January 2020 on a working visa and commenced employment as a butcher in Katanning. He was regarded as a hard-working employee who received several promotions and had a close circle of work friends.
10. In August 2024 Mr Karakaua's wife and children moved to Australia so they could be together as a family.
11. Family members described Mr Karakaua as a devoted husband and father who remained in daily contact with his relatives in Fiji and regularly sent financial support home.
12. Mr Karakaua was in good physical health and had no significant medical issues. He was a competent swimmer and had previous fishing and spearfishing experience.

SALMON HOLES

13. Salmon Holes is a picturesque, crescent shaped cove about 23 kilometres south of Albany.
14. It is a popular fishing location but is recognised as a highly dangerous environment due to large ocean swells, unpredictable waves, powerful currents and slippery rocks that slope into the sea.
15. Prior to Mr Karakaua, at least 16 people lost their lives at Salmon Holes after being swept off the rocks.
16. There are warning signs on the road leading to Salmon Holes and at the location itself stating that "Lives have been lost in this area even on calm days". The signs include pictures which show that there are slippery rocks, sudden wave surges and strong rips and undercurrents.
17. In 2013 six anchor points were installed at Salmon Holes to allow people using the rocks to secure themselves and avoid being swept away.

LIFEJACKETS FOR RECREATIONAL FISHERS

18. Recfishwest established the Free Lifejacket Loan Program in 2016 as part of their Fish and Survive strategy.

19. The program is intended to encourage lifejacket use amongst recreational fishers, particularly those fishing from high-risk coastal rock fishing locations such as Salmon Holes. The program originated in partnership with the Nathan Drew Memorial Trust following the tragic drowning of teenager Nathan Drew while rock fishing at Salmon Holes in 2003.
20. The objective of the program is to remove cost and accessibility as barriers to lifejacket use by providing members of the public with free access to lifejackets through participating tackle stores and community outlets located near popular fishing locations.
21. From the outset, Recfishwest selected manually inflating lifejackets for the program. This was based on consultation with seasoned Western Australian rock fishers, particularly those on the South Coast, as well as advice received from experienced practitioners involved in rock fishing safety in New South Wales. The consistent advice received was that, if a fisher was washed into the water from an exposed rock platform, a manually inflating lifejacket provided the opportunity to attempt to swim clear of the immediate impact zone and breaking waves before inflation.
22. In 2018, Deputy State Coroner Vicker made a number of recommendations following the joint inquest into the suspected death of Jiaolong ZHANG and death of Chunjun LI who drowned in the ocean off Salmon Holes after being swept off the rocks.
23. One of the recommendations was that Regulations be implemented which make it a requirement for people fishing from rocks subject to wave action and spray on the WA coast to wear lifejackets.
24. Subsequently, the *Conservation and Land Management Regulations 2002* (WA) were amended to require persons entering a declared high-risk ocean rock location to wear a personal flotation device (lifejacket).
25. Wearing of lifejackets while on the rocks at Salmon Holes has been mandatory since 2019. Failure to comply with the requirement can attract a fine of up to \$1000.
26. Through Recfishwest, lifejackets are available to hire free of charge from three locations in Albany.
27. The model of lifejacket used in the program was chosen for its high quality and reliability.
28. At the time of Mr Karakaua's disappearance, all loaned lifejackets were replaced with brand new ones every two years.

EVENTS OF 25 APRIL 2025

29. On 25 April 2025, Mr Karakaua travelled to Salmon Holes with his wife, children and a group of work friends. Some of the friends had fished at Salmon Holes before but it was Mr Karakaua's first time there.
30. Members of the group who were aware of the requirement to wear lifejackets on the rocks, borrowed some from the Little Grove General Store on the way to Salmon Holes.
31. Mr Karakaua put on one of the lifejackets and joined several of his friends who were fishing from an exposed rock platform. He was barefoot.
32. The sea conditions on the day were described by multiple witnesses as rough, with strong wave action. The swell was southerly at 2.6 metres and the wind southerly at 10 knots.
33. Shortly after catching a fish, a wave washed across the rock platform and struck Mr Karakaua and another fisherman, sweeping them off their feet. The other person was also knocked off balance but managed to remain on the rocks. This person was wearing shoes, which may have assisted him in scrambling to safety.
34. Mr Karakaua slipped from the rock surface and entered the ocean.
35. Numerous witnesses observed Mr Karakaua enter the water.
36. Several people called out instructions for him to activate his lifejacket. Witnesses observed him attempting to operate it, but it failed to inflate. Whether this was due to malfunction or user error remains an unanswered question.
37. Members of the public threw flotation devices, life rings and inflated lifejackets towards Mr Karakaua, however strong currents prevented these devices from reaching him.
38. Witnesses described Mr Karakaua as remaining conscious for a period of time and attempting to resist the current.
39. He was observed being carried progressively further offshore before being forced onto a reef by a large wave. At that point he resurfaced face down and apparently unconscious.
40. Shortly afterwards Mr Karakaua disappeared beneath the water and was not seen again.

SEARCH AND RESCUE OPERATION

41. Police received emergency calls commencing at approximately 1.31 pm on 25 April 2025 and responded immediately, initiating a major search operation.
42. The search involved Albany Police, the WAPF Missing Person Team, Emergency Operations Unit, Water Police and Police Dive Squad, Police Airwing, Great Southern Remote Piloted Aircraft System, SES volunteers and Albany Volunteer Marine Rescue personnel.
43. The search ran for six days from 25 April until 30 April 2025. Extensive searches of the ocean, shoreline and surrounding coastal terrain were undertaken. Despite these efforts, Mr Karakaua was not located.

Time Frame for Survival

44. An expert in search and rescue, Dr Paul Luckin, was consulted by WAPF at 6.30pm on 25 April and provided a Time Frame for Survival (TFFS).
45. Dr Luckin took into account the witness descriptions of Mr Karakaua being hit by a wave, going under the surface and then emerging face down 150 to 200 metres offshore before disappearing from sight.
46. He determined that the most probable case was that Mr Karakaua died at the time he was last seen, floating face down.
47. However, Dr Luckin stated that the best-case scenario was that, out of sight of witnesses, Mr Karakaua managed to lift his head above water and remain afloat. If so, and he was a good swimmer and/or was able to inflate his lifejacket as well as having a high body fat content then there was still a chance Mr Karakaua was alive at that time (about five hours after entering the water). He went on to advise that there was a small chance of survival to daylight, a very small chance of survival for part of the next day and no prospect of survival by the end of daylight on 26 April 2025.
48. Based on the TFFS advice, the search effectively moved from a rescue to a recovery operation from 27 April 2025. However significant resources continued to be deployed in a bid to locate Mr Karakaua's remains.
49. The search was formally suspended on 30 April 2025 after all reasonable search strategies had been exhausted.

50. A DNA profile was obtained from Mr Karakaua's toothbrush for future identification purposes should remains be recovered.
51. Police enquiries identified no evidence of criminal involvement or suspicious circumstances.
52. Proof of life enquiries (financial, immigration and social media) revealed no activity consistent with Mr Karakaua surviving after 25 April 2025. His last recorded bank transaction occurred on the morning of his disappearance. There is no record of him leaving Australia.

RESPONSE TO MR KARAKAUA'S DISAPPEARANCE

53. In July 2025, following Mr Karakaua's disappearance, Recfishwest implemented updated measures to the Lifejacket Loan Program to strengthen and enhance safety outcomes:
 - a) annual replacement of lifejackets (previously every two years) to ensure optimal condition and reliability;
 - b) refined sign-out protocols with reinforced messaging that jackets must be correctly activated and do not self-inflate;
 - c) new instructional flyers provided at all loan locations, including –
 - i. step-by-step instructions on how to use the jacket
 - ii. key safety reminders for rock fishers
 - iii. QR code linking to Recfishwest Safe Fishing webpage;
 - d) updated vendor guidance for identifying wear and tear and promptly removing compromised jackets from circulation; and
 - e) regular supplier check-ins to support consistent delivery and early issue resolution across all locations.
54. Despite ongoing improvements to the Lifejacket Loan Program, it should be remembered that the safest way to fish at Salmon Holes is from the beach.
55. Fishers are warned that lifejackets, while mandatory and obviously better than nothing, can create a false sense of security.
56. Even with a lifejacket on, fishing off slippery rock platforms like Salmon Holes is an extremely high-risk activity. Once swept into the rough, swirling seas at Salmon Holes the chances of survival, even wearing a regulation lifejacket, are not high.

57. As stated by Recfishwest Operations Officer, Mr Levi De Boni:

“...we strongly recommend for fishers to keep the sand between their toes and fish from the beach where you’ll have a better, safer fishing experience and catch just as many if not more salmon without the risks of fishing off the rocks. Everyone should come home safely after a day’s fishing”.

ANALYSIS

58. Mr Karakaua was observed by numerous witnesses being swept from dangerous coastal rocks into rough ocean conditions at Salmon Holes. He was then carried away by strong currents and was observed repeatedly struggling to remain afloat.
59. Witness evidence consistently records that Mr Karakaua's lifejacket failed to inflate despite attempts to activate it. It is not known if the lifejacket was faulty or Mr Karakaua could not activate it.
60. The final observations of Mr Karakaua were of him floating face down and apparently unconscious before disappearing beneath the water.
61. Expert advice obtained by police concluded the most probable scenario was that Mr Karakaua died at or shortly after the time he was last seen face down in the water. While survival for a limited period after disappearance was theoretically possible, survival beyond the following day was considered to have no realistic prospect.
62. There has been no contact, financial activity, travel record, social media activity or any other indication that Mr Karakaua remained alive after 25 April 2025.
63. All reports of Mr Karakaua paint the picture of a devoted, loving husband and father who proudly supported his immediate and extended family. This leads me to conclude that there is no possibility he somehow survived and is living somewhere away from his family.
64. Mr Karakaua’s family believe that he is deceased.
65. The totality of the evidence strongly supports the conclusion that Mr Karakaua drowned after being washed from the rocks at Salmon Holes.

CONCLUSION

66. Having considered the documents on the coronial brief and listened carefully to the evidence of Senior Constable Fazio at the inquest, I am satisfied beyond all reasonable doubt that Mr Karakaua is deceased.
67. The evidence establishes that Mr Karakaua was swept from the rocks at Salmon Holes into the Southern Ocean on 25 April 2025 and subsequently disappeared.
68. His disappearance occurred in the presence of multiple witnesses and was followed by an extensive search operation involving significant government agency and volunteer resources.
69. Having regard to the witness evidence, expert opinion, search outcomes and subsequent WAPF enquiries, the available information supports a finding that Mr Karakaua died on or very soon after 25 April 2025 after entering the ocean at Salmon Holes.
70. While the most likely cause of death is drowning, the absence of recovered remains necessarily limits any finding as to the cause of death. Similarly, I am unable to make a definitive finding as to the manner of death, despite the fact that the circumstances point to a finding of accident.
71. I would like to express my deepest condolences to Mrs Karakaua, her three children and all those lucky enough to have known Moni. His loss has clearly been felt deeply, and I am certain he will never be forgotten.

I certify that the preceding paragraph(s) comprise the reasons for decision of the Coroner's Court of Western Australia.

RM Hartley
Acting Deputy State Coroner

10 August 2026