



Western

Australia

RECORD OF INVESTIGATION INTO DEATH

Ref No: 31/16

*I, Barry Paul King, Coroner, having investigated the suspected death of **Rowan Wallace Cook** with an inquest held at **Perth Coroner's Court** on **12 September 2016**, find that the death has been established beyond all reasonable doubt and that the identity of the deceased person was **Rowan Wallace Cook** and that death occurred on **an unknown date at an unknown place from an unknown cause** in the following circumstances:*

Counsel Appearing:

Sergeant Lyle Housiaux assisting the Coroner

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INTRODUCTION

1. Rowan Wallace Cook (**the deceased**) was 40 years old when he was last thought to be alive on 2 October 2013.
2. Around early September 2013 the deceased travelled from New South Wales to Western Australia in his four-wheel drive vehicle. He passed through Denmark on 18 September 2103 on the way to the Perth metropolitan area, where he put his vehicle into storage.
3. On 20 September 2013 the deceased took a bus to Walpole. He was equipped with lightweight camping equipment.
4. At some stage between 20 September 2013 and 2 October 2013 the deceased set up a campsite at Aldridge Cove, a remote location on the south coast, west of Walpole.
5. On 2 October 2013 the deceased went to Walpole, presumably on foot, bought supplies and returned to Aldridge Cove. There is no evidence of his whereabouts after that.
6. On the evening of 21 November 2013, a man who had camped at Aldridge Cove on 18 and 19 November 2013 notified the Police Operations Centre in Midland that he had seen what turned out to be the deceased's campsite at Aldridge Cove, complete with the deceased's telephone and personal effects, but that he had not seen the owner of the campsite.
7. Over the next five days, police officers conducted an investigation and, with the involvement of the State Emergency Service (**SES**), Volunteer Marine Search and Rescue (**VMSR**) and the Department of Parks and Wildlife (**DPaW**), carried out a search for the deceased. They were unable to locate him.
8. Despite further searches and inquiries, no sign of the deceased has been seen.

9. On 22 May 2014 the deceased's father sent an email to the State Coroner's Office requesting that the deceased's disappearance be investigated.
10. On 23 May 2014 the State Coroner wrote to the officer in charge of the missing persons unit of the Western Australia Police to request any information available about the deceased's alleged disappearance.
11. On 18 March 2016 police provided the State Coroner with a report on the disappearance of the deceased.
12. Under section 23 of the *Coroners Act 1996* (**the Act**), where a person is missing and the State Coroner has reasonable cause to suspect that the person has died and that the death was a reportable death, the State Coroner may direct that the suspected death of the person be investigated. Where the State Coroner has given such a direction, a coroner must hold an inquest into the circumstances of the suspected death of the person and, if the coroner finds that the death of the person has been established beyond all reasonable doubt, into how the death occurred and the cause of the death.
13. On 2 May 2016 the State Coroner determined that, after reviewing the police report, she had reasonable cause to suspect that the deceased had died and that his death was a reportable death as defined in section 4 of the Act. Accordingly, she directed that the deceased's suspected death be investigated
14. On 12 September 2016 I held an inquest into the deceased's suspected death. The documentary evidence adduced was a brief of evidence¹ comprising a report by Sergeant Cameron Clifford, who had been the officer in charge of the Walpole Police Station in 2013, together with relevant material. Sergeant Clifford also provided helpful oral evidence.²

¹ Exhibit 1

² ts 4-28 per Clifford, C S

15. I have found that the death of the deceased has been established beyond all reasonable doubt. I have not been able to find how the death occurred or the cause of the death.

THE DECEASED

16. The following information was provided by the deceased's mother,³ father⁴ and brother.⁵
17. The deceased was born on 4 June 1973 at the Royal North Shore Hospital in Sydney. He was a quiet boy but was happy and sociable. He had an elder brother, Jeremy Cook.
18. The deceased's only health problems were eczema from birth and asthma later in life.
19. As a child, the deceased attended Cub and Venturer Scouts and participated in outdoor activities, including abseiling, hiking and boating. His mother was a Scout leader, so his family had holiday adventures all over New South Wales. He was a strong swimmer, having been in the Manly Nippers Surf Life Saving Club, and was also interested in martial arts.
20. In 1980 the deceased's parents separated and in 1981 they divorced. The deceased and his brother lived with their mother but had unrestricted access with their father.
21. The deceased's family shared a grazing property outside of Goulburn where the deceased learned about country life and about bush skills.
22. The deceased went to school in Balgowlah and went on to study computer science and psychology at Sydney University. In 1995 he obtained a Bachelor of Science. As soon as he graduated, he found work as a computer

³ Exhibit 1, Tab 4

⁴ Exhibit 1, Tab 5

⁵ Exhibit 1, Tab 10

programmer and he also began on-line gaming, especially World of Warcraft.

23. After six months working, the deceased resigned and spent a month exploring the coastline northeast of Sydney from Palm Beach to Manly, camping in caves. Over the next four years he worked in a variety of occupations on the east coast of Australia.
24. In 1999 the deceased began living in Dee Why. He gained a black belt in karate or ninjutsu, studied Buddhism, and worked casually at bars and nightclubs and as a security officer. In 2000 the deceased began work in a computer shop, and in 2001 he and his brother began working for a friend of his brother's in the information technology area in nightclubs. The deceased continued to work in that area. Starting about that time, he stopped using alcohol and drugs.
25. In 2005 the deceased acquired a four-wheel drive vehicle in which he travelled around Australia. He lived for extended periods in Darwin and in Girrawheen. While travelling, he kept in touch with his mother and continued to obtain income as a web designer for his brother's friend.
26. In February 2008 the deceased's mother came to Western Australia by train, and the two of them travelled and camped along the south coast of Western Australia, including the Walpole area. Later in that year, he and his brother had a falling out because, as I understand the evidence, of his mistaken belief that his brother had been in an affair with their friend's ex-partner.
27. In early January 2009 the deceased completed walking the Bibbulmun Track from Perth to Albany. In May that year he stayed with his mother in the Hunter Valley area for four months. During that time, she noticed that he had become anti-social, brusque, judgmental and argumentative. He told her that he had actively avoided contact with other hikers when he was on the Bibbulmun Track. He was particular about his diet and

worked in his room with the door closed. He became increasingly distant from his mother and family.

28. In 2009 the deceased also spent time with his father, who also noticed the change to the deceased's demeanour following his hike on the Bibbulmun Track.
29. In September 2009 the deceased moved to Budgewoi in New South Wales. He maintained contact with his mother, but neither she nor his father saw him again.
30. In either April 2010 or July 2011 the deceased called his father and abused him when he mentioned that he had seen the deceased in a photo of the deceased at the wedding of his friend and employer. In March 2012 the deceased's mother's latest letter to the deceased was returned to her unopened and marked 'RTS' with the deceased's initials. The deceased stopped working for his friend and, in about May 2013, he cut off all ties with him.
31. The deceased's father noted that the deceased was a genuine person, honest and true to his word. His family could not explain why he withdrew from them, but his father thought that it could have been partly because of his deeper interest in Buddhism and privacy. His brother thought that he was attempting to live a pure life in order to move on to nirvana.

THE DECEASED'S MOVEMENTS TO OCTOBER 2013

32. Statements for the deceased's bank account show that on February 2013 the deceased bought a solar panel and that on 25 July he bought a new battery, presumably for his vehicle, and a \$300 tent. On the latter date he also redirected his mail from his rental address in Budgewoi to a post office box in that town. It is apparent that at these times he was still in New South Wales.⁶

⁶ Exhibit 1, Tab 2, p 29

33. On 6 August 2013 the deceased closed a storage account he had at a storage facility in Tuggerah in New South Wales. He may have donated the items at the facility to the St Vincent De Paul Society in Wyong since he had called them the previous day.⁷
34. On 12 August 2013 the deceased bought \$500 worth of fuel in Coffs Harbour.⁸
35. He booked and paid for a spot at a campground in Bundjalung National Park in New South Wales from 16 August 2013 to 20 August 2013, and then from 3 September 2013 to 6 September 2013.⁹ On 9 September 2013 he spent over \$200 at a supermarket in Port Augusta in South Australia.¹⁰
36. On 12 September 2013 the deceased was in Esperance where he paid \$90 for motel accommodation, and by 16 September 2013 he was in Denmark where he withdrew \$500 in cash. Two days later, on 18 September 2013, he spent about \$50 at a supermarket in Denmark.¹¹
37. On 20 September 2013 the deceased was in the Perth metropolitan area. He placed his vehicle into a self-storage facility in Bassendean, telling the manager that he was planning to undertake a bushwalk. He arranged for on-going payments from his bank account for the storage.¹²
38. The deceased then caught a TransWA bus back to the south coast at Walpole, arriving at about 6.40 pm on 20 September 2013.¹³ He was equipped with a backpack, a one-person tent, a light tarp, lightweight sleeping and cooking gear, and provisions.¹⁴ He had left his larger camping gear, including the new tent and the solar panel, and other belongings in his vehicle. He had

⁷ Exhibit 1, Tab 2, p 30

⁸ Exhibit 1, Tab 2, p 29

⁹ Exhibit 1, Tab 34

¹⁰ Exhibit 1, Tab 2, p 29; Exhibit 1, Tab 19

¹¹ Exhibit 1, Tab 2, p 29

¹² Exhibit 1, Tab 2, p 29; Exhibit 1, Tab 33

¹³ Exhibit 1, Tab 22

¹⁴ Exhibit 1, Tab 2, pp 2-3

also left a bank credit card and three books on Buddhist philosophy. A laptop computer was not in the vehicle, but it is not clear whether he took one to Walpole.¹⁵

39. There is no direct evidence to indicate precisely when the deceased went to Aldridge Cove, but it seems likely that he went there within a day or so of his arrival in Walpole.
40. Aldridge Cove is located about 12 km west of Walpole on the Great Southern Ocean in the Walpole Nornalup National Park. It is accessible to the public only by walking on the Bibbulmun Track and then the Van Nuyts Trail past Thompson Cove. The area is known to be hazardous, with rock cliffs, king waves, sinkholes, caves, and extreme weather. There are venomous snakes and the ocean in that area is frequented by sharks.¹⁶
41. Sergeant Clifford testified that rock fishing is particularly dangerous in that area due to the slipperiness of the granite rocks and the potential for 10 metre king waves on top of six metre swells.¹⁷ He said that he understood that one or two deaths had occurred at Thompson Cove in the 1960's or 1970's when there was vehicle access to the area.¹⁸
42. The deceased set up a campsite overlooking Aldridge Cove above the level of wave activity. He erected his tent under a low-lying tree on a pad of beach sand and coffee rock that he would have had to carry into the tent site. He set up his tarp to the front of the tent to act as a covered cooking and storage area, and he had a long PVC pipe set up to collect water from a freshwater spring at the rear of the cove.¹⁹ He had a fishing line²⁰ and likely had a knife of some sort.²¹
43. On 2 October 2013 the deceased was in Walpole, where he bought food and other supplies, including cooking gas

¹⁵ Exhibit 1, Tab 4

¹⁶ Exhibit 1, Tab 2, p 3

¹⁷ ts 20 per Clifford, C S

¹⁸ ts 27-28 per Clifford, C S

¹⁹ Exhibit 1, Tab 2, pp 3 and 5

²⁰ Exhibit 1, Tab 2, p 16

²¹ ts 18 per Clifford, C S

and candles.²² It appears likely, as explained below, that he was at his campsite for a further three or four days, after which time there is no evidence to suggest what became of him.

THE CAMPSITE

44. On the morning of 22 November 2013 Sergeant Clifford spoke by telephone with the man who, on the previous evening, had notified the Police Operations Centre of finding the deceased's campsite.²³
45. That afternoon, Sergeant Clifford in company with a DPaW ranger and another police sergeant walked into Aldridge Cove and inspected the deceased's campsite and the area around it.²⁴
46. The campsite was clean and fastidiously maintained, with no sign of disturbance. Under the tarp were a backpack of good quality, a cooking stove and bags of packaged food. Nearby was a length of 80lb fishing line wrapped around a bottle.²⁵ Empty food packaging and other rubbish, some of which had apparently been found by the deceased, was carefully collected in order to be carried out of the campsite.²⁶
47. In the backpack were a mobile phone with the battery three-quarters charged, clip-seal bags with paper shopping lists and a message indicating that the deceased would be back soon, \$210 in notes, an ignition key for the deceased's vehicle, a NSW driver's licence in the deceased's name and a bank card in the deceased's name.²⁷ The last calls on the mobile phone were made on 18 and 19 September 2013.²⁸

²² Exhibit 1, Tab 29

²³ Exhibit 1, Tab 2, pp 2-3

²⁴ Exhibit 1, Tab 2, p 4

²⁵ Exhibit 1, Tab 2, p 17

²⁶ Exhibit 1, Tab 2, p 21

²⁷ Exhibit 1, Tab 2, p 22

²⁸ Exhibit 1, Tab 2, p 8

48. Significant items not found at the campsite included: a torch or head-torch, a knife, a rain jacket, hiking boots, pants and a laptop computer.²⁹
49. Part of the food was a third of a loaf of bread. The bread was mouldy and the packaging had an expiry date of 6 October 2013, suggesting that it was purchased by the deceased on 2 October 2013 in Walpole. On the basis of an estimated consumption rate of the bread and the existence of empty food packages, police officers concluded that the deceased had likely been at the campsite from that date until three or four days later.³⁰
50. The lack of a torch, a jacket, boots, pants and a knife at the campsite indicates that the deceased left the campsite intentionally. The critical question is why he did not return.
51. The fact that the deceased's laptop was not at the campsite or in his vehicle invites speculation. His mother expressed surprise that there was no laptop in the deceased's vehicle,³¹ and his father indicated that the fact that the deceased's laptop was not in his possessions was the one thing his family could not answer.³²
52. However, if the deceased was attempting to remove himself from society, as appeared to be the case, getting rid of his laptop would be an important step.
53. It would seem incongruous for the deceased to leave the campsite with his laptop but not his phone. In these circumstances, that a laptop was not found in the deceased's possessions does not appear to be probative.
54. I note that bank statements indicate that the deceased had been making a regular payment to a web-page host company in Queensland and that the payments continued after his disappearance had been discovered. At my request, a police investigator contacted the

²⁹ Exhibit 1, Tab 2, p 24

³⁰ Exhibit 1, Tab 2, p 22

³¹ Exhibit 1, Tab 4

³² Exhibit 1, Tab 5

company and was told that the last communication with the deceased was on 12 May 2012. The deceased's account was paid automatically by credit card until the account was closed on 30 August 2014 for non-payment. To the extent that the existence of the deceased's account may be probative, it seems to me that it indicates a possible intention to maintain it in the event that he wished to use it in future.³³

THE SEARCH

55. A sea search for the deceased was undertaken by Walpole VMSR personnel on 23 November 2013 in order to take advantage of brief favourable weather conditions. They were able to search the coast at and around Aldridge Cove reasonably thoroughly, but found no sign of the deceased.³⁴
56. On 26 November 2013, the land search commenced following two days of organisation, planning and resource request. The search team comprised three police officers, including two forensic officers, fourteen SES vertical rescue personnel, and one DPaW employee with extensive knowledge of the Aldridge Cove area as an advisor.³⁵
57. The SES personnel completed their search of the areas around Aldridge Cove, and SES volunteers on four wheel drive vehicles and quad bikes completed searches of the Bibbulmun Track and Van Nuyts Track. No sign of the deceased, apart from the campsite, was found during the land search on 26 November 2013. The field search commander was confident that the search should have found evidence of the deceased in the search area if there were any.³⁶
58. Given the results of the search, and due to the length of time the deceased had been away from his campsite, the

³³ Exhibit 1, Tab 19

³⁴ Exhibit 1, Tab 2, pp 8 and 10

³⁵ Exhibit 1, Tab 2, pp 9, 10, 13 and 16

³⁶ Exhibit 1, Tab 2, p 18

high risk to search volunteers in the search area and the likelihood that the deceased had died by way of misadventure from the several natural hazards in the area, the search was suspended after one day.³⁷

59. On 27 November 2013 the deceased's brother Jeremy, on behalf of the deceased's family, sent Sergeant Clifford an email in which he mentioned the existence of a cave about 730 metres west of the deceased's campsite. He asked whether the cave had been searched since it would have been a place which the deceased would have wanted to explore. Jeremy suggested that, if the deceased had gone there at the time he disappeared, that would explain the lack of a torch at the deceased's campsite.³⁸
60. Sergeant Clifford and Fire and Emergency Services and DPaW officers discussed the prospects of searching the cave. They determined that the difficulties and dangers associated with such a search precluded one.³⁹
61. However, a local anthropologist and biologist, Gary Muir, undertook two explorations of the cave in April 2014. He found no sign of recent human activity in the cave.⁴⁰

FURTHER INVESTIGATIONS

62. On 25 November 2013, media outlets were provided with a media release for publication. The release was broadcast on Western Australian commercial radio networks, print media, local media and a Western Australia missing person alert.⁴¹ No response was generated except a call from a man who had hiked into Aldridge Cove on 13 November 2013. He had seen the deceased's campsite and had walked past a man who was walking on his own into Aldridge Cove or Thompson

³⁷Exhibit 1, Tab 2, p 17

³⁸ Exhibit 1, Tab 32

³⁹ Exhibit 1, Tab 2, p 19

⁴⁰ Exhibit 1, Tab 32

⁴¹ Exhibit 1, Exhibit 1, Tab 2, p 29 and Tab 18

Cove. The description of the man was unlike that of the deceased.⁴²

63. On 26 November 2013, police investigators contacted the Public Transport Authority, airlines, the Department of Immigration and Border Protection and TransWA to request checks on the deceased's movements. No record of the deceased was found.⁴³
64. Investigators also contacted the deceased's bank to inquire whether there had been any transactions of his credit account. Bank staff provided a bank statement which showed that the only deductions from the account were for the self-storage company in Bassendean and the web-page host company in Queensland.⁴⁴ The account has not been touched since then.⁴⁵

CONCLUSION AS TO WHETHER DEATH HAS BEEN ESTABLISHED

65. A complication of the deceased's disappearance is the evidence of his apparent desire to remove himself from family, friends and the rest of society. When added to the evidence of the deceased's camping and bushwalking experience, it suggests the possibility that the deceased had purposefully abandoned his campsite and that he has been living in isolated wilderness in the southwest of Western Australia since then. That possibility is supported by interest he had shown in a hermit's camp he had seen near Northcliffe in 2008 when he walked the Bibbulmun Track.⁴⁶
66. The wilderness scenario may be theoretically possible, but in my view practical realities render the possibility remote. In particular, while the deceased was fit and healthy and was very experienced in the bush, it is apparent that he was reliant on packaged food and fuel

⁴² Exhibit 1, Tab 2, p 14

⁴³ Exhibit 1, Tab 2, p 14

⁴⁴ Exhibit 1, Tab 2, p 14

⁴⁵ ts 25 per Clifford, C S

⁴⁶ Exhibit 1, Tab 4

for sustenance and manufactured goods for clothing and shelter.

67. It is difficult to conceive that he could have survived in isolated wilderness for three years without shelter and without being able to renew his clothing and food supplies or, more importantly, that he would have set out to do so without his tent and sleeping gear.
68. I note from data obtained from the Bureau of Meteorology after the inquest that the lowest monthly mean temperature for the months of June to September in Walpole is less than 16 degrees, and that the lowest temperature recorded for those months is less than 12 degrees. The average rainfall in Walpole in 2014 and 2015 was about 1000mm.
69. Moreover, if the deceased had planned to survive without reliance on purchased food, it seems unlikely that he would have left the campsite without taking the fishing line.
70. A related consideration identified by Sergeant Clifford was the lack of any sightings of the deceased in the last three years. The area near Aldridge Cove is remote, but it is still frequented by hundreds, if not thousands, of bushwalkers and campers.
71. Apart from the possibility that the deceased intentionally left his campsite to become a hermit elsewhere, another possibility that comes to mind is that the deceased left the bush in order to seek anonymity in a Buddhist monastery. There is one such monastery near Serpentine. At my request, a police investigator contacted the Buddhist Society of Western Australia on 19 December 2016 and learned that the monks at the monastery were not aware of the deceased.
72. I note that, if the deceased intended to walk out of the bush and seek refuge in, for example, a Buddhist monastery, it is inherently implausible that he would not have taken his cash in order to make his way to his

destination by public transport in the same way that he had travelled to Walpole.

73. Another aspect of the evidence that seems inconsistent with an intentional disappearance by the deceased was his storage of his vehicle with an arrangement for on-going payment of the storage fees. That evidence indicates an intention, at least at the time the storage commenced, for a return to pick up the vehicle. It is also possible, as suggested by the deceased's family, that the deceased intended to use the camping gear left in the vehicle to camp elsewhere after Aldridge Cove. However, I note that it is also possible that he acquired that gear to use on his trip from New South Wales to Western Australia, so the existence of that camping gear is not necessarily significant.
74. Taking these considerations into account, and having regard to the various natural hazards in the area around Aldridge Cove, the high improbability that the deceased intentionally remained in the wilderness, and the lack of any contact the deceased had with his family or any known agency, I have reached the conclusion that the deceased's death has been established beyond all reasonable doubt. There is no other reasonable conclusion.

HOW DEATH OCCURRED AND THE CAUSE OF THE DEATH

75. It is not possible to find the cause of death.
76. The lack of any sign of the deceased during the search of the area around Aldridge Cove is consistent with him having somehow ended up in the ocean by accident or misadventure as suggested by Sergeant Clifford. However, there are other reasonable possibilities. In these circumstances I must make an open finding as to how death occurred.

CONCLUSION

77. While the deceased's disappearance remains a mystery, there is no reasonable likelihood that he is still alive.
78. While it is not possible to know, it is likely that he fell or was swept by a wave from a rock cliff into the ocean and was unable to return to land before he died.

B P King
Coroner
3 January 2017