

# Kowanyama Mission

1967 – 1987

**Other Names:** • Mitchell River Mission

## Details

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Kowanyama Mission was previously known as the Mitchell River Mission (although it had been given the name Kowanyama – meaning ‘many waters’ in 1917). In 1966, the Anglican Church approached the government to take control of the Mitchell River Mission. The dormitories closed in April 1967 and control of the Mission was handed over to the Queensland government on 1 May 1967. The mission became a government administered reserve known as Kowanyama. In 1987 a Deed of Grant in Trust (DOGIT) was given to the Kowanyama Community over the lands in the Mitchell River delta.

In January 1903 an Aboriginal reserve on the Mitchell River was gazetted. The Church of England established a mission at Trubanaman near Topsy Creek in 1905. Although the Church administered the Mission, it was answerable to the State who subsidised them. In 1918 the Mission moved 19 kilometres from the original location to a site on Magnificent Creek and was given the name Kowanyama, meaning “many waters”.

It was Church of England policy to isolate the children in order to expose them to Christian teachings and separate them from the influence of older Aborigines and their culture. By 1929 a two roomed fibrolite cottage had been built on the site of the Belburra Children’s Settlement which was established in 1921. The children received practical training in gardening.

Philip Frier (1999) writes:

*For less than two years between September 1918 and May 1920, Trubanaman would be maintained, in a diminished role, as a school settlement. The nineteen kilometres of road separating it from Kowanyama represented, in the missionary understanding of things, an insulation from the ‘contamination’ of the children with Aboriginal ways. Once the principle of this enforced separation had been established, and such a large distance proved to be unworkable, the children were relocated from Trubanaman, firstly to Kowanyama itself and then, two kilometres further west, to Belburra on 8 November 1921. In this way the time-honoured Australian mission strategy of the separation of Aboriginal children from their cultural roots was achieved on the Mitchell River Mission.*

Frier continues:

*By the time Belburra was established, the missionary policy towards children was entirely rigid, with all school aged children living and studying under close missionary supervision. Boys were to remain until the age of fifteen years, girls until they married.*

In 1939 a new girls' dormitory to house 50 girls had been built on the Mission and sometime after 1953 a boys' dormitory was established. By 1957 the Mission had 37 boys and 67 girls registered as living in the dormitory.

Kowanyama slowly developed into an industrial Mission based on the cattle industry, which provided work for the young boys when they reached 15 years of age and had to leave the dormitory.

When cyclone 'Dora' destroyed the Mission on 3 February 1964, rebuilding was funded by the State government. In 1967, under the provisions of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs Act 1965, the State government took full control of Kowanyama Mission. In July 1987 a deed of grant in trust (DOGIT) was given to the people of Kowanyama for an area consisting of 250 square kilometres.

In 2014, the community was administered by the Kowanyama Aboriginal Council.

## More info

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### Chronology

- Mitchell River Mission (1905 - 1967)
  - **Kowanyama Mission (1967 – 1987)**

### Related Entries

#### Ran

- [Community Services and Ethnic Affairs Department, State Government of Queensland \(1987 - 1989\)](#)  
Date: 1987 -

#### Run by

- [Aboriginal and Island Affairs Department, State Government of Queensland \(28 April 1966 - 16 January 1975\)](#)  
Date: 1967 - 1975
- [Aboriginal and Islanders Advancement Department, State Government of Queensland \(1975 - 1984\)](#)  
Date: 1975 - 1984
- [Community Services Department, State Government of Queensland \(1984 - 1987\)](#)  
Date: 1984 - 1987

## Records

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For more information and to access your records, follow the links below:

### Records

- [Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs Records \(1880s - current\)](#)
- [Adoption and Fostering \[Kowanyama\] \(1979 - 1990\)](#)
- [Correspondence Files - Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs \(1916 - 1999\)](#)
- [General Correspondence - Torres Strait Islands \(1922 - 1994\)](#)
- [Correspondence - Alphanumeric Prefix - Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs \(1909 - 1992\)](#)
- [Social History Cards - Mitchell River \(Kowanyama\) and Normanton \(1889 - 1970\)](#)
- [Edward River \(Pompuraaw\), Mapoon, Mitchell River \(Kowanyama\) and Normanton Identification Cards \(1933 - 1975\)](#)

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