



Inside Yourguide

News - local - general news

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< News >

Local

General News

National

General News

International

General News

< Sport

< Have your say

< Weather

< Email us

< Local Info

< Entertainment

< How to subscribe

< How to advertise

< Contact Us

Buy / Sell

< classifieds

< autoguide

< jobsguide

< propertyguide

Local Links

< Greater Taree City Council

< Black Head Surf Club

< Harrington and Crowdy Head

< Other

< Home

< Search

< Help

< Privacy Policy

< Copyright

Coroner at loss to explain triple fatality

Tuesday, 14 October 2003

TAREE coroner Paul Bylos is at a loss to explain how three people could lose their lives on a straight stretch of the Pacific Highway in a speed restricted 80kph zone.

As he investigates Sunday's fiery crash near the Croki turnoff, Mr Bylos is understandably shocked by the fact that eight people have now died in Manning area roads in three horrific accidents in just eight weeks.

On August 13, two teenagers died when a car left Pampoolah Road and hit a tree. On September 21 a young mother and her two toddlers died when a four wheel drive left Nowendoc Road, rolled through a paddock and hit a tree.

Already investigating the five earlier deaths, Mr Bylos is now trying to piece together what happened in the couple of seconds before Sunday afternoon's horrific three car accident near the Croki turnoff.

The weather was fine and sunny, the roadway was dry, and traffic appears to have been travelling normally within the 80 kph speed zone - restricted because of the ongoing Coopernook Bypass roadworks. Traffic was heavy, however, on the final afternoon of the NSW school holidays.

Mr Bylos said yesterday it may never be possible to say for sure what caused the accident, as both the driver and passenger of what appears to be a vehicle which crossed to the incorrect side of the road both lost their lives.

Mr Bylos was due to return to work yesterday after three weeks holiday. The callout to the accident site mid-afternoon on Sunday was a distressing way for him to resume work earlier than expected.

Yesterday he was still receiving detailed police reports and it could be some time before he decides whether or not a coroner's inquest will be held.

"It is amazing how many people can lose their lives in one accident in an 80 zone," he said. "However in the case of road accidents, any speed - even 10 kms an hour - can kill."

Police said yesterday afternoon it could be some time today before the victims' names are released. From what Mr Bylos can ascertain with the help of police from Taree Crime Unit, a northbound Mitsubishi Magna crossed to the incorrect side of the highway about 2.50pm, 400 metres south of the Croki turnoff.

Traffic travelling in the opposite direction was in a dual lane section of the highway, but no-one appears to have been overtaking, Mr Bylos said. It appears the northbound Magna crossed the

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southbound overtaking lane and collided with a late model Ford Falcon travelling in the inside lane. In the Magna were a male driver and his female passenger, who Mr Bylos understands were a married couple from Byabarra near Wauchope. The 59-year old woman died after being thrown from the vehicle and the man, aged 66, died when the car crashed into an embankment and burst into flames.

Also killed were the passenger in the Falcon, a 64-year-old man believed to be from Windermere Park, near Morisset.

The Falcon's driver, a 66-year-old man from Abernathy, was airlifted from the scene by the Hunter Westpac rescue helicopter and taken to Newcastle's John Hunter Hospital. He was yesterday in a stable condition, suffering a number of fractures.

A third vehicle travelling south behind the Falcon was also involved, its driver receiving only minor injuries and treated at the scene by Taree ambulance personnel.

Taree Fire Brigade extinguished the fire that destroyed the Magna, while Rural Fire Service brigades from Coopernook and Cundle-Moto assisted the Taree Rescue Squad at the scene.

After long queues of traffic formed in each direction, vehicles were directed down a slip road adjacent to the scene.

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