

Claims organised gangs of Tongans are smuggling kava into Northern Territory Aboriginal communities will see the federal government ban the traditional Pacific Islander drink in Australia.

Existing kava import allowances of two kilograms per person will end in a move that has angered Pacific Islanders.

The proposed ban comes as Australian overseas aid funds the development of bottled kava drinks as an export industry in Fiji.

Federal Indigenous Affairs minister and Northern Territory senator Nigel Scullion is on a mission.

“We accept people practicing their culture in this country, of course we do, but when it is perverted and redirected, and to harm our first Australians, it isn’t a right, it’s a privilege,” Senator Scullion said.

“But I’m an advocate unashamedly for Aboriginal and Torres Strait islander people in Australia, that’s my job and I think it should be banned and I will continue pursuing it until it is banned.”

Kava is already illegal in Northern Territory Aboriginal communities like Arnhem Land because of the health, social and financial impacts.

“The vast majority of offenders who bring it into the Northern Territory are Tongan, of Tongan descent. There are obviously some Tongans out there who don’t abuse it,” said NT Police detective superintendent Tony Fuller, head of the Drug and Organised Crime Division with a long service history in the remote communities.

“That said we have a significant amount of Aboriginal people we are arresting.

“Basically what kava does is it compounds existing health and substance abuses issues in the communities, so what it does is it adds one more layer of problems to the community.”

It is also banned in Western Australia.

Kava 'much like a cup of tea or coffee' in Pacific Islander culture

The drinking of kava is an ancient Pacific islander custom that is now regularly practiced in Australia.

A total ban on kava imports because of the actions of a few has shocked the tens of thousands of Pacific Islanders in Australia.

“It makes me angry, it makes me very, very angry,” said Zane Yoshida, an Australian citizen from Fiji who regularly has kava sessions at his house in Brisbane.

Mr Yoshida is also the founder of Taki Mai, a company that makes bottled kava drinks.

“We definitely deserve to have kava as part of our traditional cultural practices, even in Australia,” he said.

“If anything, it has been a positive influence on the Fijian community, even the youth in Australia, as an alternative to alcohol.”

Organised crime

Two kilograms of kava per person can legally be brought into Australia from Pacific Islands like Fiji.

“Generally it’s brought into Australia by Pacific Island groups, and we’re seeing what we call stockpiling in places like Sydney and Brisbane, and then the couriers will either bring it up by plane or mail it, or sometimes they’ll just drive it up,” said detective superintendent Fuller.

NT police have seized about 10 tonnes since 2009 and made more than 200 arrests.

Penalties include prison terms of up to eight years for quantities over twenty-five kilograms.

Kava costs about \$30 a kilogram overseas but once in Arnhem Land it sells for about \$1000 a kilogram.

“There’s been I think over 17 busts over 100 kilograms and one of the things this signifies is that this is a organised criminal activity,” said Senator Scullion.

“The size of the busts, the sophistication of communication, this is significant organised criminal activity - and with significant organised crime comes other activities. People say, ‘We are drinking kava today, but we have a suite of drugs for you’.”

Kava comes from the root of a pepper plant. It has a distinctive taste and a relaxing and slightly numbing effect.

Pacific islanders enjoy sharing kava, much like a cup of tea or coffee in other cultures, but it is drunk in much larger quantities for the effect.

A health supplement?

It was introduced to the Northern Territory in the 1980s by Pacific islander missionaries as an alternative to alcohol.

After initial successes it was soon abused, then restricted and finally banned with the imposition of the 2006 NT intervention.

Kava is not widely used in Aboriginal communities outside north-west Arnhem Land.

“We understand that in a very naive community like Arnhem Land, this is why it is doing the damage, because it is drunk in vast quantities and not in a cultural sense at all,” said Senator Scullion.

While the federal government wants to ban kava imports, Australian overseas aid has funded kava production in Fiji as a health supplement for export.

Mr Yoshida’s company Taki Mai has benefited from tens of thousands of dollars of Australian international aid funds to develop their product in Fiji and says there is a certain irony about the government’s stance.

“I’ve developed a kava supplement that I currently sell in the United States and Fiji through the natural food channels. This produce here is a kava supplement for taking the edge off, for relaxing,” he said.

“As we progress with clinical trials here in Australia, we’d like to make structure function claims for relieving stress and anxiety.”

Their product was launched by the Fiji’s prime minister Voreqe Bainimarama in July last year in the presence of the Australia High Commissioner and thanked the federal government for its support.

Kava is legal in the United States and the European Union last year dropped its ban, saying it could not have substantial health concerns.

Mr Yoshida said the federal government has got it wrong.

“The key word for this is education. If we can put together programs to educate people about alcohol abuse and drug abuse, why can’t we do the same for kava,” he said.

No date has been set for when kava imports will be banned and Senator Scullion promises to speak to Pacific Islander communities first.

Description:	A plant that is traditionally used for therapeutic and recreational purposes by certain cultures.
Exemptions:	<p>You do not need a permit if you are aged 18 years or over and are a passenger on a ship or aircraft who is importing up to two kilograms of kava in either root or dried powder form in your accompanied baggage.</p> <p>Any amount of kava imported by any other means such as post or air cargo, requires a permit. You cannot take kava into the Northern Territory or Western Australia.</p>
More information and requests to import kava:	<p>Permits will only be issued for scientific or medical purposes.</p> <p>To import kava you must obtain the following from the Office of Drug Control:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Licence to Import Controlled Substances, and• Import permit for each consignment of kava. <p>For more information about importing kava visit the Office of Drug Control.</p>