

Ramingining Community Council Inc

4th March 1999

The Committee Secretary
House of Representatives
Standing Committee on Aboriginal &
Torres Strait Islander Affairs
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600

Dear Sir/Madam

Submission to the Committee in Regard to the Reeves Report

I wish to make the following submission to the inquiry into the Reeves Report on behalf of the Ramingining Community Council Inc.

Ramingining is a Yolŋu community of approximately 700 situated in northeast Arnhem Land, approximately 500 km east of Darwin and 200 km west of Nhulunbuy. The town is about 25 km from the coast of the Arafura Sea and is located adjacent to the Arafura tropical wetland heritage estate. A community profile is enclosed for your interest and information.

There are several areas of concern for our community within the Reeves Report, but the one causing the most problem for our people is Reeve's proposal to drop the land entry permit system. It is this point that we wish to discuss here.

If Arnhem Land were opened up for access to the general public, it would be a complete disaster for the Yolŋu people. We would lose our cultural heritage virtually overnight. The reasons for this are many, but include:

- There would be thousands of fishermen driving all over our lands and sacred areas. The right to fish is another separate issue which also needs to be addressed, but our people would be deeply offended by having uninvited non-indigenous Australians trespassing on our land. Reeve's comment that the NT Trespass Act could be invoked in this instance is laughable.

Our nearest police are in Maningrida, over 1½ hours drive away and they have told us that they cannot and will not come over to Ramingining simply to ask some white people to move on. Similarly, bringing these trespassers to court is a time consuming, expensive and in most cases fruitless exercise.

- There would be totally uncontrollable amounts of banned substances such as alcohol and kava being brought in to our communities, much of which would then be on-sold to our people. Again, police have advised us that they can only act if they actually catch someone in the act of selling a banned substance; their being 1½ hours away certainly guarantees a free hand to any outsider to do whatever he likes in this area. Our community has applied for an Aboriginal Community Police Officer to reside in Ramingining, but at this point of time funding for this position is not available.
- Our people would be put under enormous social pressure by outside non-indigenous Australians bringing their expectations into our communities. We cannot provide accommodation, fuel, food, medical services, etc to these people and nor should we be expected to.
- All of the above doesn't even begin to address the major point, which is that under Aboriginal law, access to land is restricted and it has been this way for many thousands of years. Even we have to gain permission from other land-owners to go on their land; this is our system and has always been so.

It has always been very difficult for us Yolŋu to describe our relationship to our land to white Australians. It is a very sensitive issue. For example, there are certain areas that even our white Council staff, who live and work with us, cannot go into without permission from the Yolŋu land-owner for that place. If we find intruders, Yolŋu or others, in those special areas, we get sick.

I'll give you an example: Suppose you owned a "country estate", where you went on the weekends and holidays. It was a very nice place. But one day a whole mob of people came in with 4WDs and motor bikes, drove all over the place, camped out along the river, cut down trees, left all their rubbish lying around, shot some local animals, etc. They kept on doing this every weekend. They didn't even bother to ask you if it was alright to park themselves on your land. They don't care. You'd get pretty mad, right? You'd go to the police, and maybe the police might come out to your place and move a few people on. But the people would come back next week and pretty soon the police wouldn't turn up. If this happened, you'd sell your property and go and live somewhere else, right?

Now, you white fellas can do this – buy and sell land like it was a car or a truck. But we can't do this. Our land "ownership" is a spiritual thing – we can't buy and sell land, it would be like selling our own mother or our own family. We can't do it.

The Yolŋu people own Arnhem Land under Australian law. The Yolŋu people have lived in Arnhem Land for 40,000 years. We have a very special feeling for our land. We are not hiding this land from the rest of Australia and other Australians, but if outsiders were allowed to come onto our land, for the reasons stated above, it would kill us.

This is why, when faced with the Reeves recommendation to abandon the permit system, we get very upset. Because we not only want to keep the permit system, but we would like to make the permit system even stronger if we could. To us, it's a matter of survival – of the Yolŋu culture and the Yolŋu people themselves.

We therefore ask the Parliamentary inquiry into the Reeves Report to acknowledge our position and to not accept the Reeves recommendation that the existing permit system be abandoned.

We also request that the Parliamentary Committee members take the time to come and visit us in Ramingining during their visit to the Northern Territory.

Yours sincerely

Ronnie Barramala
Chairman
Ramingining Community Council Inc