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House Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs

Inquiry into community stores in remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities

Terms of Reference

The Committee shall inquire into and report on the operation of local community stores in remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, with a particular focus on:

- food supply, quality, cost and competition issues;
- the effectiveness of the Outback Stores model, and other private, public and community store models; and
- the impact of these factors on the health and economic outcomes of communities.

Summary

I have been visiting remote communities in north Queensland since 1976.

My standing in tropical food plants is recognised internationally, particularly in Pacific Island locations.

Quality and variety of fresh product can be improved in remote community stores in Australia by a more organised fostering of local gardening initiatives.

Locally produced food (and ornamental plants) can compliment product from main stream markets in community stores.

All communities that I have visited have attempted local food supply initiatives and have had mixed successes.

Successful initiatives have beneficial flow on effects in the community in relation to education, health, jobs, recreational activities, traditional values and general attitudes to living in remote locations.

Main stream fresh food products are not locally available all year and quality suffers severely, particularly in tropical locations.

Horticultural support in tropical locations is less than adequate to assist the various private, community, school based and health provider based local gardening initiatives.

There are significant differences in growing main stream food crops in tropical locations and much of the information needed is not readily available.

Various tropical food crops that are more suited to tropical locations are not main stream and also suffer from poor availability of cultural and use information.

Locally significant native food plants still have a place in the local diets and activities.

Community stores have and can continue to play a valuable role in promoting quality and variety in the diets of the community residents and visitors.

Background

Since 1976, I have made regular visits to and maintained contact with persons in remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities in various parts of Queensland. This association has been in relation to work duties while employed with the Queensland Government – Department of Primary Industries and privately.

My personal interest of over 35 years in growing food crops in tropical conditions has developed my skills to a level that is internationally recognised.

I maintain a comprehensive, nationally significant, collection of food plants suited to tropical conditions on my family property near Innisfail. For over 30 years I have experimented with their cooking and preparation in traditional ways as well as in more innovative recipes.

I have close associations with horticulturally prominent people in various Pacific Island locations, particularly Samoa and Tonga.

Main Points

I have been visiting remote communities in north Queensland since 1976.

In mid 1976 I undertook a survey for fruit flies in the Cape York Peninsula area with an extended stay at Lockhart River. During this time I developed some appreciation of the difficulties of growing crops in the area and of maintaining a supply of food to the residents particularly through their community store.

Since that time I have visited and stayed in most of the communities in Queensland, particularly those in Cape York Peninsula and in the Torres Strait where I have assisted numerous gardening initiatives and learnt from successful efforts.

My standing in tropical food plants is recognised internationally, particularly in Pacific Island locations.

I have produced and continue to produce information packages addressing key issues in tropical food production and use. The value of this information has been recognised by people interested in tropical food gardening throughout the most tropical areas. In April of 2007, I presented a paper to the First International Symposium on Breadfruit Research and Development in Fiji "Breadfruit – the Australian scene".

Quality and variety of fresh product can be improved in remote community stores in Australia by a more organised fostering of local gardening initiatives.

Most community stores that I have contacted have sold or given away locally produce fruit and vegetables. Background to these efforts is extensive but generally store managers have been happy to retail local product if it approaches commercial quality even though it interferes with their external ordering system. A more organised and integrated approach to local gardening can supply products that are not normally available through the mainstream marketing system. If quality standards are suitable, garden freshness is a major sales point. Locally produced from the community farm sometimes has a negative effect as some people expect not to have to pay for food produced in their community farm even though they may be prepared to pay for a similar product that comes from outside the community. More education of the costs and effort in producing local food could help overcome this reluctance to pay for community farm product.

Mapoon community store has sourced local product (zucchini) and packed it to main stream standards. This effort was appreciated by locals. Aurukun store received local product (fresh lettuce greens) already packed to a high standard which was well in demand. Over the years there have been many good examples. Badu island garden has produced one of the widest ranges of high quality garden product.

Locally produced food can compliment product from main stream markets in community stores.

Local production of main stream foods is one issue but a longer term and more sustainable issue is that of growing crops that are more suited to tropical conditions. By promoting the food value, economics and uses of locally produced crops like taro, tannia, rambutan, winged bean, tropical green leaf vegetables, breadfruit, cooking and sweet banana types, community store can provide a greater diversity of product. Supplies of locally produced product can be more reliable in times of intense weather periods when access to communities is even more restricted. Excess locally produced product can be used in value adding initiatives like making jams, preserves and taro/breadfruit/cassava/ chips fried or frozen.

Community stores and local gardening should not be limited to foods. The amount of money that leaves each community to purchase ornamental plants is considerable. Community stores can be an outlet for locally produced house and yard plants.

All communities that I have visited have attempted local food supply initiatives and have had mixed successes.

The definition of "success" can relate to a number of factors. Some of these are; weather the initiative produced sufficient product, the cost of production was reasonable, the quality of the product was acceptable, for how long was the product available-seasons/months/years, weather the initial outputs were built on to provide a wider range of or an improved product.

Lack of reliable information on the selection, growing, handling and use of suitable crops has been one limiting factor in initiatives being more successful.

These local food supply initiatives have beneficial flow on effects in the community in relation to education, health, jobs, recreational activities, traditional values and general attitudes to living in remote locations.

Local food supply can be directed at supplying the community store or supplementing what is available from the store. In both cases developing an interest and skills in local gardening is beneficial to the community generally. Gardening can be incorporated as a practical educational exercise for all members of the community. From planning a garden to growing a range of locally significant foods for ecotourism, gardening skills need to be developed and passed on to build a local knowledge pool.

Main stream fresh food products are not locally available all year and quality suffers severely, particularly in tropical locations.

When community stores rely on imported fresh foods, their product management skills and infrastructure needs to be very good. Perishable product shelf life is limited and all events from the farm gate to the consumer will have their effects. Locally grown product can have distinct advantages over southern or imported perishable products. An example in tropical locations is comparing green beans from southern markets in summer wet season with locally grown winged beans.

Horticultural support in tropical locations is less than adequate to assist the various private, community, school based and health provider based local gardening initiatives.

A range of obstacles such as travel cost, travel conditions, communication access and lack of networking opportunities are partly responsible for inadequate horticultural support to many communities. Even the training provided by TAFE and others is rarely specific to local conditions and is broader curriculum orientated. This is aggravated by a lack of texts and other readily available information on tropical gardening.

There are significant differences in growing main stream food crops in tropical locations and much of the information needed is not readily available.

Many of the more common vegetables like tomato, pumpkin, sweet potato, cucumber, beans, carrots, cabbage and lettuce can be grown in tropical locations but the standard growing methods and even varieties are significantly different so as to be a major factor in crop failures.

Successful enterprises need more documentation and be encouraged to contribute to formal and informal gardening networks.

Various tropical food crops that are more suited to tropical locations are not main stream and also suffer from poor availability of cultural and use information.

Breadfruit is one example of a crop that is well underutilised in northern communities. In Mapoon, I undertook an exercise of supplying some recipes on breadfruit to 6 families that were keen. Soon after, I supplied some cartons of fruit for experimenting with. The response to the foods produced was exceptional and most subsequently sourced trees to plant. Breadfruit is only one of dozens of plants with good potential in tropical locations.

Locally significant native food plants still have a place in the local diets and activities.

Some local native food plants have been developed commercially but many are still to reach the position that they are suited for. Peninsula plants like peanut tree, beach cherry, wongai and lady apple are attractive ornamental plants that have fruit from which a variety of value added products can be produced. In supporting these initiatives local stores will assist in developing an increased local identity for the residents.

A reliable supply of locally significant “bush foods” can form the basis of tourism activities aimed at giving culturally significant experiences.

Community stores have and can continue to play a valuable role in promoting quality and variety in the diets of the community residents and visitors.

Some efforts by health workers to improve the demand for variety and quality of food products from community stores have been very successful. Workers at the stores know the local families well and can have a positive impact on them if some training and publication material is available to the store staff and some incentive is there to encourage them to get involved.