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

Dear Secretary

Thanks you for the opportunity to make a submission into the inquiry on Indigenous Employment.

As an Indigenous organisation founded in 1977 to "help Aboriginal people in any way it can", Bloodwood Tree Association is finally able to bring some positive outcomes for Indigenous people in the Port Hedland and Pilbara region area of Western Australia.

It has been unfortunate that from the onset of the great minerals boom (particularly iron ore) of the sixties and the gas discoveries in the seventies in the Pilbara, Aboriginal people were excluded from any involvement in the construction and operation of these mines and gas fields.

Today, we see a multitude of mines in the Pilbara region mining for not only iron ore but copper concentrate, gold and even diamonds as well as a number of other precious minerals.

The iron ore expansions following the increased demand from in particular China, have now seen unprecedented increases in tonnages, taking areas such as Port Hedland, through BHP Billiton Iron Ore looking to expand their capacity to 152 million tonnes per annum by 2008 from the current 80mta, following expansions in 1998 from 40mta since the late seventies.

BHP Billiton Iron Ore have also embarked on an Indigenous Employment Strategy, with a target of 12% Indigenous employment by 2010, which is also passed on to contractors.

Training and employment in Port Hedland have always been a bit of a "jungle" for those looking to find relevant work, however with the job network system refined and just one agency in our town, based in South Hedland, this has allowed the community to interact and coordinate with efficiency and bring about relevant employment outcomes for Indigenous people.

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In 2003, this organisation looked seriously at bringing together all relevant agencies in an effort to coordinate our resources for better employment outcomes, and following discussions with Mike Montgomery (previous ALGA President) and some ideas taken from the Moree, NSW “Aboriginal Employment Strategy”, Bloodwood Tree formed the “Local Employment Strategy” group.

It would be fair to say there is a good amount of local passion within the group to bring about more local and Indigenous employment, and the challenges for this to occur are somewhat complex and even isolated in many cases.

The iron ore boom in the sixties brought “wealth” to the then somewhat sleepy town of Port Hedland where a second township named South Hedland was built with minimal facilities and no forward planning.

Iron Ore workers lived in South Hedland in new fully air-conditioned homes in amongst State housing un-air-conditioned properties where unemployed mostly Aboriginal people lived, with little education, no relevant skills and basically no work.

This situation created a haven for alcohol and other drug misuse and crime, particularly amongst the young, and this led to widespread anti-social behaviour as well as vigilante groups.

Since 1986, when the first public meeting in relation to crime was held in South Hedland, there has been some but little improvement, with local and Indigenous employment only recognised as a key to stop the slide into poverty and crime well into the nineties.

I have attached the slides from the two Powerpoint presentations that relate to both the Local Employment Strategy (LES) as well as the “Preparing the Workforce” project brought in through the “Communities of Practice” funding in 2004.

The Hedland Senior High School now has an Indigenous participation of 40% and rising, while it is also recognised that there is a population migration away from Western Desert communities in the Pilbara into Port Hedland. (ref: Department of Indigenous Affairs “Mapping & Gap Analysis of Port Hedland www.dia.wa.gov.au).

While the Local Employment Strategy has brought about a number of success stories, there is still a long way to travel particularly in the areas of education, skills training and mentoring, as well as counselling in the areas of drug and alcohol, culture and family as well as traditions.

We are agreed that big companies such as BHP Billiton Iron Ore, along with all contractors need to recognise the difference in the two cultures, particularly in the work place, and there needs to be some negotiations with a view to changing employment practices and cultures to assist both the employee and employer in producing better outcomes.

There has been suggestions that, with some 46% Indigenous unemployment in Port Hedland, (including CDEP participants, who are recognised as being unemployed by the LES), government should look seriously at regulating local and indigenous employment in remote regional areas as part of mining license conditions, similar to those in Northern Canada where the Erkati Diamond Mine boasts over 30% Indigenous employment. Erkati is operated by BHP Billiton.

There is also some concern in relation to Labour Hire companies that currently do not make any contribution to traineeships, apprenticeships or skills training in our region.

Government should recognise the remote regional area of the Pilbara; over 500,000 square kilometres of land mass; around 42,000 residents; 12% Indigenous population; Australia's largest tonnage port (Port Hedland); probably Australia's second largest tonnage port (Dampier); Billions of dollars in mining royalties sent to the Federal Government each year; large Indigenous unemployment (not in permanent jobs).

The Federal Government needs to put more resources into capacity building communities, (both Indigenous and non-Indigenous) to facilitate across the board training, apprenticeship and employment programs, even on a regional fly-in fly-out basis, (as occurs at the Erkati Diamond Mine) and further resources need to go towards mentoring programs for Indigenous training and employment.

We at Bloodwood Tree Association look forward to working with the Federal Government in a way that will bring about benefits to the entire Pilbara community through local and Indigenous training and secure employment opportunities.

Please do not hesitate to contact the undersigned if further information is sought.

Yours sincerely

Bob Neville
Manager

3 May 2005