



Government of South Australia

Department for Environment  
and Heritage

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Dr Jacqueline Dewar  
Secretary  
Senate Environment, Communications, Information  
Technology and the Arts Committee  
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Canberra ACT 2600

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Dear Dr Dewar

As requested during our attendance at the Senate *Inquiry into Australia's national parks, conservation reserves and marine protected areas* in Adelaide on 6 June 2006, I am pleased to provide information regarding the *Kuka Kanyini at Watarru – Caring for Country* project.

The *Kuka Kanyini at Watarru* project being undertaken in the Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara (APY) Lands in South Australia is an innovative, ambitious and highly strategic project for the protection of biodiversity and the conservation of a significant Indigenous environment.

The project arose from the findings and recommendations of a ten-year biological survey of the APY Lands conducted by the South Australian Department for Environment and Heritage (DEH) between 1991 and 2001. The Biological Survey utilised the extensive traditional knowledge and skills of Anangu together with scientific information to map plant communities and record plant and animal species. Overall, 700 plant species were identified, including many not previously recorded for the area, as well as 27 native mammals and 150 bird species. Of the many reptiles found there were 33 species not previously recorded for South Australia. The survey found that populations of feral animals are having a significant impact on the biodiversity values of the area and identified that the main management issues were to maintain the traditional pattern of fire and prevent wildfires, maintain and protect rockholes and soakages, and control camels, rabbits, foxes and cats. This knowledge and the relationships that were built between DEH staff and the Traditional Owners during the biological survey provided the sound foundation on which to develop the *Kuka Kanyini at Watarru* project.

*Kuka Kanyini* is about 'caring for country'. It combines scientific information gathered during the biological survey with traditional Indigenous knowledge and skills to enhance biodiversity, revitalise traditional cultural and land management understanding and practice, provide employment and training, and improve health and wellbeing. The poor health and wellbeing of Aboriginal people in the APY Lands has received much publicity. Many of these problems

derive from feelings of loss and grief and the fracturing of people's traditional relationships with their land. The *Kuka Kanyini at Watarru* project establishes a genuine partnership between the Traditional Owners and the South Australian Department for Environment and Heritage to address matters of joint concern. This environmental project is also a vehicle for broadly based community development, including job creation and health and wellbeing benefits, as well as strengthening of relationships and traditional knowledge.

Watarru is one of the most remote communities in Australia, situated in the far north west of South Australia on the APY Lands. Watarru is a small community with a population ranging seasonally from 60 – 100 Anangu people.

*Kuka Kanyini at Watarru* has been in operation since January 2004 and is based on the premise that the foundation of the wellbeing of traditional Aboriginal communities is their strong association with the land. The project supports the Anangu Elders in enhancing that association by strengthening the ties between elders and young people to ensure that knowledge and skills are passed on to the next generation. The project is also designed to protect and conserve biodiversity in an integrated way through reducing the number of feral animals, particularly camels; increase the number of preferred species, such as bush foods, on a sustainable basis; re-instate a diverse age structure of the vegetation; clean and protect rockholes for use by native species; and develop a sanctuary where the reintroduction of certain native species can occur. Funding for the project is being provided by the South Australian Government through the Department for Environment and Heritage and the Aboriginal Lands Task Force, Department of the Premier and Cabinet.

There is widespread community support and involvement in the project and it is apparent that it has increased self esteem, especially among young men. The senior men are involved in identifying flora and fauna species, restoring rockholes and undertaking vegetation management through the use of fire, while the senior women are involved in harvesting and monitoring bush foods and cleaning rockholes. The women also play a crucial role in strengthening family and community relationships and passing on knowledge and language. The younger men are culling and mustering camels and selling them for export or to abattoirs. As part of the school curriculum, teachers and children are collecting and mapping scientific data using Geographic Information System (GIS) and Global Positioning System (GPS) technologies and through this approach the children are connecting with traditional land care skills with guidance from the elders.

Since the project commenced there have been some positive and tangible results:

- Exclosures have been built over a number of rockholes to prevent damage and access to water by camels whilst still permitting access for native animals.
- Fences are being built to protect culturally significant areas from damage.
- Artificial water sources are being built to ensure water for the survival of preferred species.
- Over 1200 feral camels have been mustered, with the profits from sales returned to the community.

- An unfenced sanctuary area of approximately 1,225km<sup>2</sup> has been established as a breeding ground for preferred species and possible reintroduction of threatened species. This will also assist the maintenance of bush food and culturally important plant species.
- Monitoring of threatened species is being undertaken, with follow up control of dogs, cats and foxes, and the use of patch burning where required.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that there is already an increase in kangaroo and emu numbers while new Malleefowl nests and burrows for the Great Desert Skink have been located. Large plantations of quandongs are being planned and these will be fenced to prevent destruction.

Up to eleven Anangu men and women have been employed full time and a further ten are employed on a casual basis. Training is being provided on a range of vocational skills such as welding, vehicle maintenance, animal husbandry and use of GPS technology. These will all lead to longer term skill development and employment opportunities.

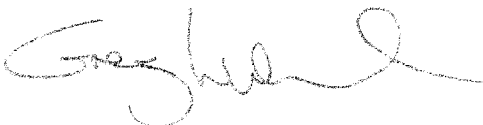
While the project has been designed initially for one indigenous community at Watarru, the model has immense potential for broader application across the APY lands where similar environmental and social issues need to be addressed.

The *Kuka Kanyini Project at Watarru* received the prestigious 2005 SA Great Environment Award and was a finalist for the 2006 Prime Minister's Environmentalist of the Year Award and the 2006 national Banksia Award in the Land and Biodiversity Category.

For further information I have attached the *Kuka Kanyini Pilot Project at Watarru, First Annual Report, November 2005*.

Please contact Dr Bob Inns, Manager, Land Management Branch by telephone on 08 8124 4718 or by email on [inns.bob@saugov.sa.gov.au](mailto:inns.bob@saugov.sa.gov.au) should you require any additional details.

Yours sincerely



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