



THE WAITCH PROJECT

West Australian Indigenous Traditional Culture and Healing

Sanori House, 102/126 Grand Boulevard,

Joondalup, WA 6027

Email: waitchproject@gmail.com

Telephone: 08 9301 1234

Healing and Renewal

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**THE WEST AUSTRALIAN INDIGENOUS
TRADITIONAL CULTURE AND HEALING PROJECT
PERTH, WESTERN AUSTRALIA July 2009**
**(Submission to the Senate Select Committee on
Regional and Remote Indigenous Communities)**

Introduction

Our group is called the Western Australian Indigenous Traditional Culture and Healing (WAITCH – Nyoongah for Emu) Project; a unique and powerful partnership of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people working together for the well-being of the Aboriginal community. We present this submission to the above Senate Select Committee for consideration.

As the Aboriginal communities of Western Australia are an integral part of the whole national fabric, consideration and action on this submission will therefore have significant positive affect on the wider Australian population. This is an essential principle of indigenous thinking and cosmology, the *interconnectedness* of all life, and the potential "ripple effect" of thought and actions.

We also present this as a preamble and request for the opportunity to address members of the Committee as soon as possible in Western Australia due to the health status of our primary Aboriginal elder who is 79 years old.

We are led and convened by an Aboriginal elder and non-Aboriginal elders, Aboriginal health workers and cultural trainers. Our Aboriginal elder is Mr. Ken Colbung, (Nundjan Djiridjakin), A.M., M.B.E., who is elder and clan leader of the Bibulmun Tribal Group, first Chairman of the Institute for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AITSIS), Fellow of West Australian Museum, Member of Cemetery Board and well renowned representative, spokesperson, worker and advocate for *Nyoongah* people. For example, he was the primary driving force behind the repatriation of *Yagan's* head from the London Museum, instigator of many education, employment and social well-being programs, and over the last 20 years, cultural 'overseer' to the return of traditional healing methods for his people.

He is well supported by our primary non-Aboriginal elders and practitioners Vasudeva Barnao and Kadambii Barnao, co-founders and co-directors of the LiFE Academy (R.T.O.) in Joondalup who have over 25 years research

experience in traditional Aboriginal healing methods of south-west Western Australia and 20 years experience in delivering health services and education free to Aboriginal people. Appendix I gives more details on all proponent's experience, expertise and qualifications.

All members have connections to regional Aboriginal communities.

Urban-Regional Interface

While we are a metropolitan based group, we suggest there are very strong socio-cultural links between the health and wellbeing of regional, remote and metropolitan based Aboriginal people. Firstly, many of the city-based Aboriginal people moved here from the regions in the past fifty years and their families and ancestors in times before that. Secondly, many regional and remote people have intermarriage and other historical connections to metropolitan *nyoongah boodjera* and people. Thirdly, due to the above reasons, there is considerable contemporary interaction and travel between the city and regionally based groups. Finally, many regional people also visit for health, social, legal and economic reasons, without necessarily having a family support network.

This has tended to mean a disproportionate increase in the number of metropolitan based Aboriginal people, and extensive travel between here and the outer regions. Indeed, Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) figures from 2006 show the highest Aboriginal population live in the metropolitan area around Perth, with 27,828 of the States' 77,872 (35%) Aboriginal people. Appendix II shows the regional Aboriginal population distribution in Western Australia.

The 2005 Department of Indigenous Affairs report "Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage", shows that our metropolitan Aboriginal population suffers from very similar life depleting and threatening issues as those in regional and remote communities. In spite of this, most political and economic attention is consistently directed towards more regional and remote areas such as the Pilbara or Kimberley Regions. This disproportionate attention continues to exacerbate the rapid decline in Aboriginal life quality; shown through all the usual social indicators including health, education, economics, social well-being and judiciary.

We therefore urge you to be aware of the close link between the well being of regional and metropolitan Aboriginal people and the need for healing throughout the interconnected Aboriginal communities. We suggest that an integrated approach for regional and metropolitan community challenges would create simultaneous back up for the aims of such an approach.

Our Perspective

We therefore propose the following important points as submission to the committee.

That, for the advancement of the health and well being of the Aboriginal people of Perth, of Western Australia and Australia it is essential for them:

1. **to have access to their culture and its essential values whether they live permanently or are temporarily residing in the city or in the regional areas**
2. **to have access to elders and role models for personal development and education**
3. **to have access to culturally appropriate health care, healing, counselling and life-skill training that includes cultural values and practices and other health and wellbeing services which interface with cultural values and practices holistically**
4. **to have access to traditional sites that are beneficial to groups of Aboriginal people for education and training in traditional and non-traditional skills and knowledge**
5. **to have access to culturally appropriate environments in which they can enjoy self esteem, healthy relationships and be supported to develop a positive lifestyle**

1.

Having access to culture and its essential values means having permanent places where the culture is held and strengthened and where people of the culture can meet each other and invigorate spiritual values, familial bonds, relationships to elders, skills and the arts. This need not be a residential site, in fact there are good arguments for the site to be particularly non-residential so that other community issues can be dealt with separately.

There is a general concept about Aboriginal people in our society that only Aboriginal people in remote or regional areas have a living and important cultural link to traditional sites of significance and traditional practices. Little is really known by local, state and federal government departments as to how Aboriginal people in the Perth area connect to and interact with their traditional sites and what practices they still enjoy. This can be seen by the lack of conservation of very important cultural sites like the recently desecrated Men's Law site on a subdivision in Carramarr, or the Benneeyowli Burial site in Joondalup both of which are now so crowded by houses in the first instance and car parks and shops in the second instance as to make them unusable for traditional practices. There is in fact nowhere for a private ceremony, a quiet talk or meeting let alone dancing and singing or being able to simply go to the toilet when at the site.

Yet these and many other traditional sites of significance are essential to the cultural identity of the Aboriginal people of Perth and others who have familial links to the sites from regional areas. Positive cultural identity is the birthright of every human being and forwards self esteem and a sense of positive connection to others of one's culture and in that strength of sense of self and belonging, connection to other people of other cultures.

Just as Aboriginal people living in Perth need to have access to their culture and values, so too do the many Aboriginal people who come to Perth. Many Aboriginal people from the very young to the very old come to Perth for long, short and permanent stays often without having any way to feel comfortable in a positive Aboriginal cultural setting. Cultural sites with other services adjoining them (as in the other points in this proposal) can create a culturally appropriate support within positive environments encouraging positive activities.

In New Zealand, Maori people always have direct access to culture. Even when in hospital they can go to the hospital Marae or sacred meeting place, to be in a setting that is uplifting and resonant with their values. In Perth and other places in Australia, Aboriginal people need to have such comfortable places in such a way as we propose in this submission.

There are still some very large bush areas that have significant sites in appropriate settings. These should be identified conserved and if suitable utilised (with the consent of the Aboriginal people who are responsible for them) within projects such as we are proposing in this submission.

2.

Due to colonization, the cultural context for elders to positively contribute to the health and well being of their people has been largely disturbed, particularly in the Perth area and the South West, but generally in all areas.

To **have access to elders and role models for personal development and education**, sites need to be developed where access to these important people can occur regularly in a natural setting embodying the essential cultural values. This submission proposes using sites agreed to by significant elders with a wide range of familial ties across tribes, to utilise and invigorate the site values and construct places for holistic health consultations, education and training - both traditional and appropriate non-traditional.

3.

We propose that the above points will be part of the foundations for enabling Aboriginal people **to have access to culturally appropriate health care, healing, counselling and life-skill training that includes cultural values and practices and other health and wellbeing services which interface with cultural values and practices holistically.**

The other parts of the foundations are to structure health, counselling and life- and work skill training that speak to the spiritual values, cultural talents and issues of emphasis for Aboriginal people.

The standard of health of the Aboriginal population is very poor in 2009. As with education and employment the standard approach fails because it focuses on the Western Anglo-European perspective as to what constitutes the proper means to the ends. The ends are good health which everyone can agree on, but the means often involve symptomatic relief of the long suffered and deep seated *cultural alienation and destruction of life purpose.*

A new approach is needed that uses the valuable assets of the Aboriginal culture to heal its own people. Western medicine must be part of this picture but play its part through a more culturally sensitive and appropriate interface mechanism such as a multidisciplinary team of: 1. traditional healing philosophy and elders 2. natural/holistic therapists and holistic counsellors and 3. Health education and life-skill training personnel, all of whom can refer people to medical services (on site or otherwise if necessary).

Let us give an example of this. In our WAITCH project we are using the symbolism of the traditional Waitch Dreaming story (as held and spoken by elder Nunjan Djiridjakin) to speak to the pain and soul searching of our clients. The Waitch (emu) started as a crocodile, swimming down from the north to Perth with the whale and the shark (1. regional - metropolitan connection). The whale was in the middle trying to keep the shark and crocodile from killing each other (2. violence, risk taking). The shark turns around the back and bites the crocodile's tail off in two pieces (3. consequences of choice of behaviours). The crocodile is drowning and crawls ashore in great pain dragging himself he reaches a cave (4. need for a special place when a person is hurting). Birds outside the cave can hear the groaning and screaming and offer help (5. importance of helpers and seeking help). They say that he must stop his carnivorous ways and he agrees (6. change of behaviour leads to being helped). The birds give him beak, feathers and legs and he is reborn as an emu, a beautiful dancer and runner (7. renewal and health through change and growth).

4.

All the above points lead to the need **to have access to traditional sites that are beneficial to groups of Aboriginal people for education and training in traditional and non-traditional skills and knowledge.**

Empowerment of a person through knowledge is common to all cultures. For Aboriginal people the land itself is a mother who teaches and gives understanding of life. An appropriate, culturally significant site is the most appropriate place to engender positive outcomes in education and training. Ask any Aboriginal person; being "in country" is an automatic mind-body medicine with immediate positive outcomes.

"In country" training and education can lead to employment in such areas as site maintenance, ranger duties, educative cultural workshops and tours, production of artifacts, dance and music programmes, therapist/counselling qualifications. In such circumstances the training will be engendering the very self esteem that the Aboriginal person will need in successful employment placing and a healthy life style.

An associated site to the site we propose for the Project is one where traditional flower pit healing ceremonies take place offering healing solutions from an ancient practice. These time and energy intensive experiences can be connected to other therapy, counselling and training opportunities giving benefits that can be carried forward into the person's future life.

5.

If a person has self esteem, healthy relationships, a healthy body and mind through a healthy life style, that person is most able to achieve their goals and have a successful life.

The negative stereotypes of the oppressed, abused and culturally fragmented Aboriginal person in society are socially ingrained concepts with attitudinal outcomes which deny Aboriginal people their share of health and wellbeing. Deep seated issues of loss, abandonment and powerlessness need to be addressed appropriately. Now that we as a society have acknowledged the Stolen Generation we have to realize what effect on the break down of family, elder leadership and cultural values this sad and destructive phase of Australian history has in **daily** life. Every day Aboriginal people are still living with the results of past government acts and bureaucratic structures. They wake up every day to more loss and trauma from emotionally and physically disabled family and friends and a society that still can't fit them in anywhere, just like a hundred years ago.

Aboriginal people need new environments of healing and knowledge, they need -

to have access to culturally appropriate environments in which they can enjoy self esteem, healthy relationships and be supported to develop meaningful employment and a positive lifestyle.

Project Model

The group making this submission is also making a project model proposal from the individual and collective experience and expertise in the areas cited as essential for the project model proposed. We ask to be able to address the committee and give more information and insight on this model which could be applied in other metropolitan and regional centres.

We propose a project model at the Waitch Dreaming site. This site is situated in the City of Wanneroo and is culturally and practically suited to the project because it is:

1. culturally significant in its connection to the Emu Dreaming ethos of renewal and rebirth encouraging spiritual, mental and physical wellbeing for Aboriginal people
2. is a connection between the north and the south regions of W.A.
3. close to all necessary resources and populations needing the services
4. still undisturbed, undiminished in geological, biological and cultural values and available for use
5. able to be used due to the permission of elder Ken Colbung, (Nundjan Djiridjakin)
6. will provide employment, education, training and healing for Aboriginal people in a purposeful "in country" cultural environment

We suggest that similar criteria would be useful for any city or regional area.

The Waitch Project model includes:

1. **7 Clinic Rooms** for Aboriginal-appropriate holistic health and medical consultations
2. **2 Seminar Rooms** for education and training in health, holistic counselling and therapies, general Aboriginal culture, healing culture, site preservation and maintenance, history, arts, dance and music
3. The same Seminar Rooms to also be utilised for workshops presenting Aboriginal culture and arts, health issues, nutrition, family and couple relationship problem solving, computer skills. Also used for meetings with community, inter-community and government groups, plus value building associations with anthropologists, biologists and historians
4. **A Teaching Kitchen with Dining Room** for practical health and nutrition classes, training in the hospitality industry plus providing meals for seminars and workshops. Food and success in projects goes hand in hand; giving comfort, energy and ensuring people come back for more.

5. **Performance Space** for larger workshops, cultural productions, national and international conferences, cross cultural education with visiting schools
6. **An Outdoor Amphitheatre** for cultural performances and festivals

Basic Project Structure

A team of elders, therapists and teachers along with health professionals and trainers would create a health, education and training stream for each individual attending the project on any given day or series of days or months. This stream would be chosen by an initial assessment and interview and ongoing responses to different parts of the Project's services.

Example of Enacting Project Structure

The structure of the health, education and training services would be flexible in the way in which individuals can experience aspects of the project in an order that correlates best to their needs. However it is expected that "in country" site specific cultural immersion would be the initial contact, concurrent with the holistic health and counselling services affording stress and trauma relief. This enables the person utilizing the services to feel comfortable and at home immediately, with stress therapies maximizing the experience into one that they will wish to repeat. In these sessions underlying health conditions can also be detected and addressed. Training skills given in these sessions will provide life life-skills such as stress and trauma reduction, harm reduction, problem solving skills and basic nutrition. Those who want to, can also begin training in holistic therapies as they are continuing their cultural immersion and experiencing other training such as hospitality industry or cultural arts and ambassadorship.

The project structure is designed from the many years of experience of the group in providing health, education and training services specific to the needs of Aboriginal people.

In Conclusion

With a much smaller general population base and smaller economy New Zealand manages vastly more culturally sensitive services to its indigenous people, particularly in regard to culturally appropriate holistic health care. Australia needs to reach out to the positive cultural values of Aboriginal people and enable the Aboriginal people to regenerate individuals and families by interfacing with country, elders, holistic health, education and training which in turn can enable an interface naturally with western models of health, education, training and employment.

There is no doubt that previous ideas and models have generally failed. What makes us think that we know any better? The Aboriginal people in our group have successfully made an interface with the western world but have kept their connection to country, elders and culture intact. They are bringing up the second and third generation to do the same. The non-Aboriginal people of our group have worked in service of the Aboriginal people of Western Australia for the past twenty years supporting their cultural values and providing free health care, education and training, from which all members of the group have greatly benefited. Together we feel we represent a new and dynamic vision of an integrated dynamic Australia.

We recognize the processes and outcomes of this Inquiry have their own course and agenda. We do however, humbly request in the spirit of the Great Apology made this year that you:

- ***advocate this project model to senior commonwealth government ministers such as Jenny Macklin and state ministers such as Kim Hames***
- ***respond with some articulated pathways to do your investigation in such a way as it will not be bogged down in red tape***
- ***ask public servants involved in the inquiry and its outcomes to renew their commitment to aboriginal advancement***
- ***contact us soon so that our 79 year old elder can tell you his important message.***

Respectfully yours

Ken Colbung (Nundjan Djiridjakin)



and

Kadambii Barnao



For the Waitch Project

CONTACT PERSON: Kadambii Barnao – Mobile number 041 799 2580
GENERAL TELEPHONE NUMBER FOR WAITCH: 9301 1234
EMAIL: waitchproject@gmail.com

MAIL TO: The Waitch Project, Sanori House, 102/126 Grand Boulevard
Joondalup 6027

Appendix I

Experience, Expertise and Qualifications of WAITCH Project Proponents

Tracy Gilbert, Jindee – Diploma of Administration, Cert IV Small Business Management, Cert IV in Holistic Counselling and Mind-Body Medicine, Cert IV in Workplace Training and Assessment, manuscript assistant DIISR, meeting and correspondence and site recording assistant to Mr. Ken Colbung Nundjan Djiridjakin, current volunteer holistic counsellor and therapist to Aboriginal community and former holistic counsellor and therapist at Aboriginal Alcohol and Drug Service.

Shannon Kearing, Koordah – 1987 to present national dance performer (including tour of Germany), teacher, story teller, history and cultural ambassador, activist Black Deaths in Custody and Mabo graduate of West Australian Academy of Performing Arts, B.A. Indigenous Studies (Curtin University), previous tour guide Nannakat Tours and Captain Cook Tours, Kings Park Aboriginal Art Gallery.

Dennis Simmons, Kaiber - Workshop facilitator and Board member of Yirra Yaarkin Theatre Company, teacher of traditional Nyoongah dancing and culture in schools and communities, Advanced Diploma of Performing Arts, Certificate in Aboriginal Theatre, graduate of West Australian Academy of Performing Arts, Natural Region Management Board, member of State Level Aboriginal Justice Agreement Board, graduate of Australian Business College, previous clerical typist for Minister of Police, actor of stage, film (writer, director, actor) and National Indigenous TV host (Nyoongar Dandjoo), radio presenter Wadjuk Radio, conductor of Marum Brydia Stirling Council project of Nyoongar culture and dancing for high school students, Cadet lecturer at West Coast TAFE, overseas and national cultural performer and musician.

Charmaine Walley, Tammar – Board of Executive South West Aboriginal Land and Sea Council, Juvenile Corrections Officer, Karate instructor, graduate of Women's Education Course from Gnangara Aboriginal Community, Certificate in Flower Essence Therapy, former Aboriginal teaching assistant, Education Department W.A..

Vasudeva Barnao – Co-director of the Australia wide R.T.O LiFE Academy offering free education and training to Aboriginal people since 1989, Advanced Diploma in Holistic Counselling and Mind-Body Medicine, Cert IV in Workplace Training and Assessment. Honourary Ph.D., Knight of Malta, volunteer co-convenor Russel Street Sunday soup kitchen 1985 -2009, national and international lecturer in Holistic Health and Counselling.

Kadambii Barnao – CEO and Co-director of the Australia wide R.T.O LiFE Academy offering free education and training to Aboriginal people since 1989, Advanced Diploma in Holistic Counselling and Mind-Body Medicine, Cert IV in

Workplace Training and Assessment. Honourary Ph.D., Knight of Malta former convener and teacher at the Gnangara Kindergarten and Women's Education Course at Gnangara Aboriginal Community, volunteer co-convener Russel Street Sunday Soup Kitchen 1985 -2009, national and international lecturer in Holistic Health and Counselling.

Appendix II Regional Summary of Indigenous Population Statistics in Western Australia

(Source: Raw data from "ABS preliminary estimates only: Indigenous and non-Indigenous Preliminary Experimental Estimated Resident Population at 30 June 2006. These tables compiled by G Ellis-Smith, WDC.040208)

Table 1 Sorted Number of Indigenous People in Region.

Region(LGA determined)	Indigenous	%age of Indig total	Non-Indigenous	Total	Indigenous %age	Pop'n %age Rank 1= highest
Peel	1,603.0	2.06	87,903.0	89,506.0	1.8%	10
Gascoyne	1,801.0	2.31	7,779.0	9,580.0	18.8%	2
Great Southern	2,254.5	2.90	52,772.5	55,448.0	4.1%	7
South West	3,379.0	4.34	138,298.0	141,677.0	2.4%	8
Wheatbelt	3,849.5	4.94	65,854.5	72,026.0	5.3%	6
Mid West	5,989.0	7.69	45,759.0	51,748.0	11.6%	5
Goldfields-Esperance	6,531.0	8.39	49,073.0	55,604.0	11.7%	4
Pilbara	8,143.0	10.46	36,190.0	44,333.0	18.4%	3
Kimberley	16,494.0	21.18	16,511.0	33,005.0	49.97%	1
Perth	27,828.0	35.73	1,478,290.0	1,506,118.0	1.8%	9
State	77,872.0	100.00	1,978,430.0	2,056,302.0	3.8%	

To Note:

Nearly thirty six percent of the States indigenous population lives in the Perth Region. The unemployment rate among this group is high, approx 25% to 45% depending on participation in 'work for the dole' and other government subsidised programs. This is a disproportionately high population for the geographic area, suggesting there are many people living in the Region who have come from elsewhere originally.

The *socio-economic impact* of this needs to be recognised, calculated and acted upon. We need to ask, for example: What are the health, education, judiciary, labour market and community infrastructure issues and costs around this cohort?

The Kimberley Region only has 21.2% of the States indigenous population and yet seems to receive extra-ordinary attention and resources from both State and Federal Governments. We need to ask why; other than recognising the importance of mining and resources industry.

The Kimberley and Pilbara have 33.64% of the States indigenous population; still less than the Perth Region alone (35.73%). We need to ask how much is being spent in each Region and compare. It's a reasonable guess the Kimberley and Pilbara will have a much greater amount of funding than Perth.

Table 2 Nyoongah Country regions indigenous population

Region(LGA determined)	Indigenous	%age of Total	Non-Indigenous	Total	Indigenous %age State
Great Southern	2,254.5	5.79%	52,772.5	55,448.0	4.1%
Peel	1,603.0	4.12%	87,903.0	89,506.0	1.8%
Perth	27,828.0	71.52%	1,478,290.0	1,506,118.0	1.8%
South West	3,379.0	8.68%	138,298.0	141,677.0	2.4%
Wheatbelt	3,849.5	9.89%	65,854.5	72,026.0	5.3%
Total	38,914	100%	1,823,118	1,864,775	

Key

* = Nyoongah Country is a term used to describe the geographic area associated with *Nyoongah* Aboriginal people. This includes five geographical areas: Wheatbelt, South-west, Peel, Great Southern and Perth(Metro +)

** = Perth has 27,828 indigenous people in total population of 1,506,118(1.85%). Seventy one percent of the indigenous population of 'Nyoongah Country' live in the Perth Region. While there are people from many language groups in the Perth area, the majority of these people are Nyoongah. The socio-economic impact of having 71% of the States indigenous population in Perth needs to be explored, reported and acted upon.

Conclusions

Examination of the raw data and these tables raise significant questions regarding the allocation and use of resources for indigenous economic development in each region.

Key issue for WDC is whether it is receiving the 'population proportionately appropriate' amount of funds to service the people in the region.

Second to this but also important is the high indigenous population in the Perth Region and its potential socio-economic impacts.

Thirdly, following on from this is the lack of resources to facilitate the potential 'migration' of some of those people back to the region.