

## SUCCESSFUL EMPLOYMENT INITIATIVES ARE LEADING TO A BETTER QUALITY OF LIFE FOR MANY INDIGENOUS AUSTRALIANS AND HAVE BECOME A SOURCE OF INSPIRATION.

STORY AND PHOTOS: ANDREW DAWSON

**D**espite record lows for unemployment of below five per cent across Australia, a woeful Indigenous unemployment rate of 16 per cent and even more damning 21 per cent in regional areas remains a blight on a buoyant economy facing a range of skills shortages.

Assisting Indigenous Australians in cities, towns and remote settlements find meaningful work looms as one of the great challenges ahead for a nation wanting to break the cycle of despair in many of these communities.

Prominent Aboriginal leader Mick Dodson hopes more of his young people hearing about Indigenous success stories will give them the confidence to be successful themselves. He believes too many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children gain a false impression that all Indigenous people are failures.

"The change to my approach has been rather than dwell on the negatives and the failures, look to the successes and see where they can give you the answers that you have been searching for over many years for overcoming the failures," Professor Dodson recently told the ABC.

"Australians generally, and perhaps Indigenous Australians, don't hear nearly enough about Indigenous successes, except

when it comes to sport and in the arts. If we are able to hear about our successes and achievements in other aspects of life like running businesses or running health services then that helps build confidence amongst young people, and in my view will help break much of the despair that afflicts our communities."

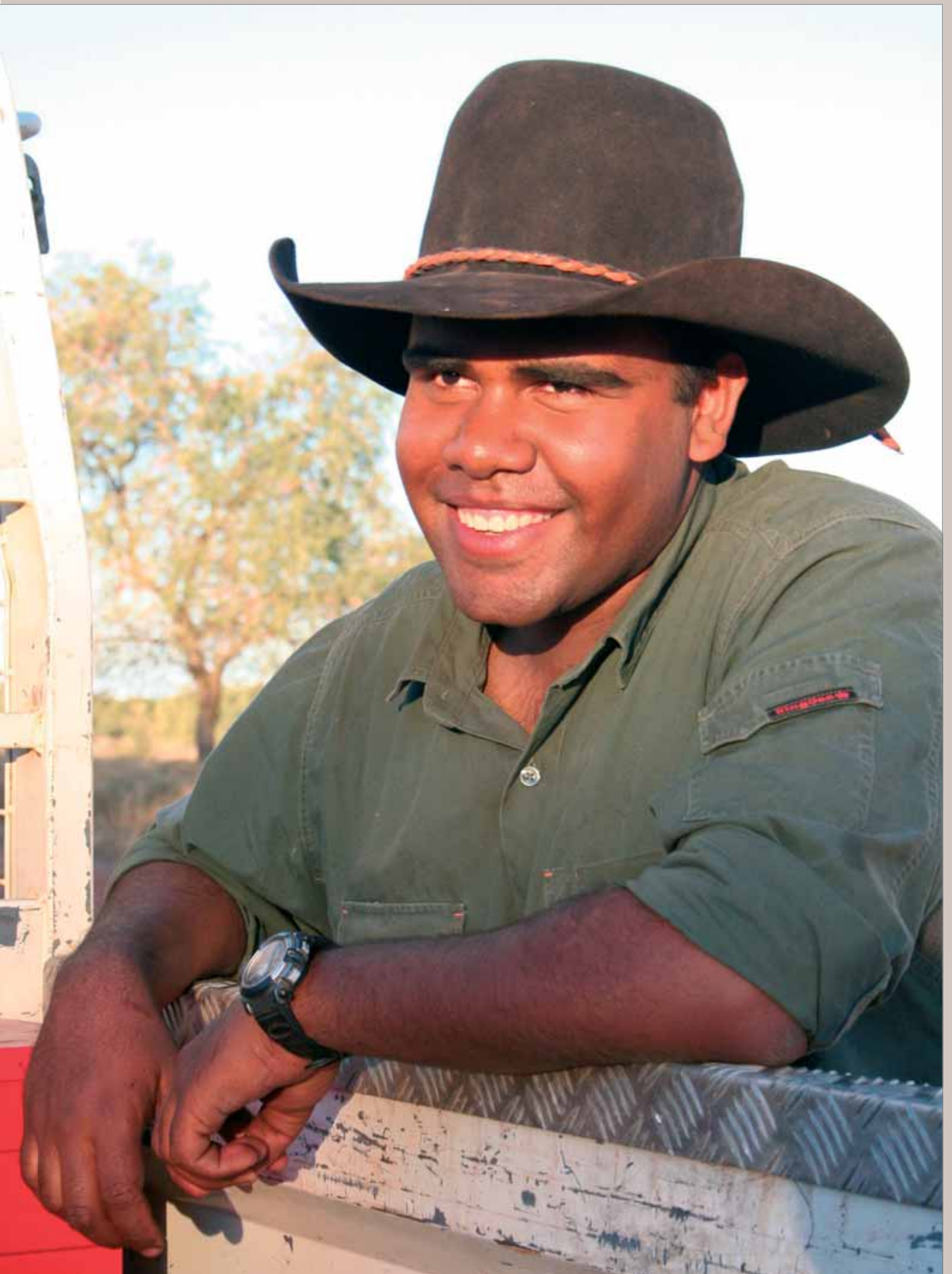
Finding these success stories has been the focus of an inquiry by the House of Representatives Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs Committee. The committee has travelled the length and breadth of Australia to investigate why some of the 147,000 Indigenous people with jobs have succeeded, while others haven't.

The ATSI Committee, chaired by Barry Wakelin (Member for Grey, SA), went to the Western Australian town of Kununurra to hear from the Wunan Foundation. The foundation's executive director Ian Trust says its partnership with Kimberley Group Training has helped hundreds of Indigenous people find meaningful work at the nearby Argyle diamond mine, and also many other business ventures.

Ian Trust believes Aboriginal communities need a long-term vision, patience and strong local leadership to drive change and overcome

Station hand James Grey at Roebuck Plains Station, WA. Continued page 42 ▶

# MORE THAN A JOB





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*Station hand Cameron Sturt at Roebuck Plains Station, WA.*

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any damaging preconceived notions of failure.

“In the past there has been too much focus on failure in Indigenous affairs and you get that impression by just watching the news that most organisations are dysfunctional and not doing anything,” he says.

“But that’s not quite true—there are lots of organisations right around the country really doing a lot of things. Our focus at Wunan has been trying to build on success and getting our communities to see that, to believe in themselves, and then they can achieve a lot of things for themselves.”

The committee visited the world’s largest diamond mine at Argyle and was impressed by the efforts of its owner Rio Tinto to employ local Indigenous people. Argyle works closely with Kimberley Group Training to help more than 200 Indigenous trainees and apprentices overcome poor literacy and numeracy skills to succeed in their workforce.

Argyle’s community relations superintendent Ray Chamberlain says the company is mindful of helping many Aboriginal trainees adjust to living away from friends and families.

“The biggest challenge that we have got is the distances and the remoteness of where some of the people come from,” he says.

“Literacy and numeracy is a big issue in this part of the world. They

are probably our two biggest barriers in helping people get over the hurdles of employment training. By making people job ready, by improving their literacy and numeracy, we are improving our chances of getting local people from the region.”

One Indigenous mine worker Rowena Lupton agrees it wasn’t easy living nearly 200 kilometres away from her family in Kununurra.

“It is hard to adjust at first working with Argyle Diamonds—with 12 hour days and getting your body adjusted to that,” she says. “But while you are on site at Argyle, it’s a fantastically well equipped company. The accommodation is second to none—a lot is done for you.”

Ray Chamberlain says like anyone, what Aboriginal people really want is meaningful and rewarding work.

“The main reason for the success of our employment programs is that at the end there are real jobs available to people committed to joining our team. It gives the local people some hope, some stability and I suppose the capacity to compete for jobs in the outside market.”

Getting a job has helped turn many of these young people’s lives around and to become role models for others in their communities.

“We have got people come out of Warnum, that’s about 40 kilometres south of the mine, that probably would never have had any job prospect at all until they have been offered roles at Argyle and gone through four years of apprenticeships. Now they are on the verge of signing contracts that will take them into big money

positions. They’re able to talk about purchasing their own vehicles, buy a house in Wyndham, and things like that, that were probably unachievable before we started our program.”

The Bawinanga Aboriginal Corporation in the remote Northern Territory town of Maningrida is also making great strides in developing employment for its residents.

But unlike in the Kimberleys, there is no mining, manufacturing or agriculture nearby to accommodate a willing workforce, so the corporation relies heavily on a Community Development Employment Projects (CDEP) program to employ more than 600 people. They have jobs as diverse as making mud bricks, earthmoving, horticulture and mechanical repairs.

One stand-out CDEP project has been the land management program, which employs 25 Aboriginal sea and land rangers to patrol hundreds of kilometres of Arnhem Land coastline surrounding Maningrida.

For \$230 CDEP income a week—the same as unemployment benefit—senior sea ranger Matthew Ryan and his men spend long days searching the seas and extensive coastline for illegal Indonesian fishing boats poaching shark fins, or patrolling inland to hunt down feral animals and control weeds. They have encountered 25 foreign fishing vessels this year.

“At the moment we sight them, we photograph them, get the GPS location and send this information off to Customs and Quarantine,” he says. “This is an important issue that concerns all of Australia—if any of

those animal diseases such as foot and mouth come onto the land, it's going to affect our cattle, everything.

"We are doing it because it's our country—we know the area and have local knowledge, we are protecting it for ourselves and Australia."

Matthew Ryan remains a strong supporter of earning CDEP, in preference to getting the dole or 'sit-down money' for nothing.

"Rather than getting someone else to come in and do your job, why don't you do it yourself. Rather than sitting on your bum, you should be

program highlights the value of CDEP to these regional or remote communities, where alternative employment is not readily available.

"They deliver a lot more in terms of outcomes than any other program that the government funds for coastal surveillance because here there are people paid on CDEP going out and acting as the eyes and ears of the Australian community," Mr Snowdon says.

Ian Munroe says CDEP is the "economic cornerstone of the community at Maningrida" helping to fund programs such as a women's art

"For anyone that knows anything about this community and this corporation and its success with the CDEP employment programs, let me say it is just bloody stupid," he says.

"They are not being mismanaged, they are doing things that they ought to do, yet there was a proposal that they not be allowed to continue with their CDEP. Their budget is \$26 million a year—\$11 million comes from government grants, including CDEP, so if you took away that and they employ 600 people directly as a result of CDEP, what happens to those people? Those businesses would not be able to operate properly and undoubtedly there would be very high levels of unemployment back in this community."

ATSIA Committee Chair Barry Wakelin has mixed views and expects the administration of CDEP to feature prominently in the committee's final report.

"Generally speaking I think there is a very strong frustration with it," he says. "Whatever your colour or whatever your creed, the dilemma is choosing the welfare path or the world of work, and that's the great challenge of CDEP."

Besides mining, tourism is another growth industry opening up more and more job opportunities for Indigenous people in regional Australia. Home Valley Station off the Gibb River Road, owned by the Indigenous Land Corporation, is one tourism venture pouring resources into training local Aboriginal people. The manager of this 700,000 acre cattle station, Nick Bradley, has employed an in-house TAFE teacher to guide his 10 Indigenous trainees through certificate courses in tourism.

"It's important to have continual support and that's why we employed a full-time lecturer. That makes a huge difference," he says.

"It is embryonic but I do think the progress made so far by the trainees we have is fantastic. We have a number of Certificate I graduates and they'll move on to Certificate II. If they attain cert two we give them a bit more money—an extra \$50 a week. The objective is full-time employment, and we guarantee that



Top: Sea rangers Matthew Ryan and Victor Rostrum at Maningrida, NT. Bottom: Ray Chamberlain and Rowena Lupton from Argyle Diamond Mines, WA.

working for your own living and employment," he says.

The Bawinanga Aboriginal Corporation chief executive Ian Munroe says the ranger program is a prime example of a CDEP program providing meaningful work.

"It's certainly good value for money for the Australian government," he says. "They are getting their border protection, fisheries and quarantine work done for the basic pay someone on unemployment benefit receives."

Committee member Warren Snowdon (Member for Lingiari, NT) agrees, saying the sea rangers

The key to improving Indigenous employment is providing strong local leadership and positive role models.

centre, health food shop and native plant nursery.

But Warren Snowdon has concerns government policy changes requiring CDEP participants to seek other jobs or go onto Newstart unemployment benefit after 12 months may threaten these programs in Maningrida.

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*The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs Committee meeting with the Bawinanga Aboriginal Corporation at Maningrida, NT.*

to any of the trainees that graduate from cert three, either on Home Valley or other ILC affiliates.”

Nick Bradley believes the opportunity has changed many of his trainees’ lives for the better after being on work for the dole CDEP programs in Wyndham or Nulla Nulla.

“These guys were getting \$229 a week for 18 hours a week. They were just treading water, not getting anywhere, not progressing and just subsisting in the laziest way possible. So we are giving them the opportunity to gain these skills and to interact with tourists on the Gibb River Road and earn more money to provide for their families. If they do more hours they get paid the national training award. So they’re being empowered.”

Tourism trainee James Kadibil is one who is glad to put his Wyndham days behind him. “This has changed my life right around,” he says. “Before that I was just sitting at home doing nothing being on CDEP four hours a day. Now I’m out here for full days with better work and a better lifestyle.”

The traineeship has also fuelled his ambition to work in management one day. “Hopefully to try and run this place to help Nick out or move on somewhere else and start up another business down south,” he says.

A general hand at the nearby El Questro Wilderness Park, Chris Winton, is another Indigenous youth aspiring to be a mechanic after working in El Questro’s workshop.

“Good job, good money, good scenery and good opportunity. I love it out here. I get away from town and keep away from trouble,” he says. “I want to become a qualified mechanic, that’s my aim.”

The general manager of El Questro, David Henry, admits one challenge has been helping young trainees cope with conflicting pressures from home.

“Particularly for the young girls who are expected to mind all the children after a week’s work, it’s not really much of a break when they get home,” he says. “There’s also pressure from boyfriends, pregnancies and those sorts of things.”

The Warrangari CDEP coordinator, Ronee Atkins, says it’s important to help the 11 tourism trainees and general hands at El Questro adjust to a normal working routine of eight-hour days. Her persistence has paid off with El Questro planning to expand the program to 20 Indigenous employees next tourist season.

The ATSLA Committee also travelled to Roebuck Plains Station, near Broome, to see how this cattle station owned by the Indigenous Land

Corporation was providing many young Aboriginal men and women from the Outback with real opportunities to further themselves in the beef industry. The heavy emphasis is on training and for the Aboriginal station hands to learn firsthand from more experienced station managers and stockmen about the day-to-day running of these vast cattle stations.

Station hand Cameron Sturt wants to manage Roebuck Plains or another ILC cattle station one day. “It will take a while,” he says. “It’s a lot of experience really, just as long as you work all of the time. I’ve been working on cattle stations since I was 15.”

The chief executive of a Broome job network and training provider, Nirrumbuk Aboriginal Corporation, Martin Sibosado, says they have successfully found work for more than 1,000 people in six years. He believes the key to improving Indigenous employment is providing strong local leadership and positive role models that reassure young people about moving away from Broome for work.

“We put six young guys into a mine site east of Fitzroy Crossing to start apprenticeships,” he says, “subsequently working in the mine—a fly-in, fly-out operation. After about six months, those young people suddenly bought cars, had trendy clothes and a bit of money to spend on their weeks off. It was surprising the number of young people that then came in and asked ‘How do we get what they’ve got?’. I said, ‘Well they have to go to work, there’s a discipline involved’ and that’s definitely when I talk to them about the life skills required.”

He says this is an example of Aboriginal people meeting the need to take more responsibility for their circumstances.

“Basically committing yourself to improving your situation and dealing with the fact that you may not be able to get a job near where you live so you have to deal with making those adjustments in your life,” he says.

“They are realities that all people in this country face, which is all tied to our economic independence and the sort of lifestyle that we choose.” ■

*For more information on the Indigenous employment inquiry visit [www.aph.gov.au/house/committee/atsia](http://www.aph.gov.au/house/committee/atsia) or email [atsia.reps@aph.gov.au](mailto:atsia.reps@aph.gov.au) or phone (02) 6277 4559.*