



Job satisfaction

Success stories in
Indigenous employment
provide benefits that reach
far beyond the individual.

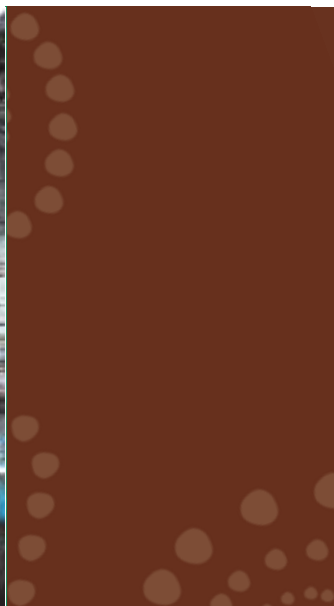
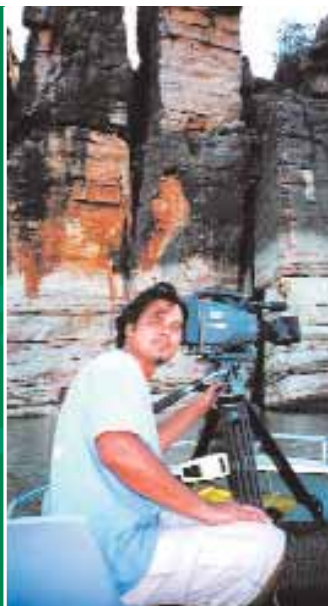
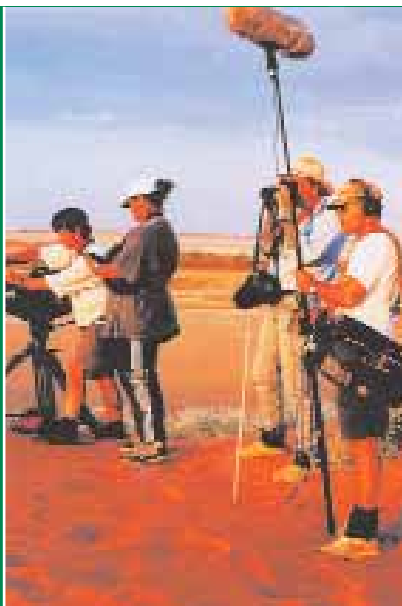
Story: Peter Cotton

Prisilla Collins remembers the first time she saw an Aboriginal person working in a bank and the impact it had on her. "For me, it was a huge thing," said Ms Collins, "When young [Aboriginal] kids see an Aboriginal person working, they say: 'If they can do it, we can do it'."

Ms Collins, who is the Chief Executive Officer of the Central Australian Aboriginal Media Association (CAAMA), was giving evidence in Alice Springs to an inquiry into Indigenous employment. The inquiry is being conducted by the House of Representatives Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs Committee.

Ms Collins told committee members that CAAMA is the largest Indigenous media organisation in Australia, with its own record label, a film and television production house, and a television station. Established 25 years ago to give Aboriginal people a voice in the media, CAAMA now employs 36 people, mostly Aborigines, and has been hailed as one of the success stories in Indigenous employment.

Left to right: Don Freeman, managing director of the Tjapukai Aboriginal Cultural Park, with two of the performers, Steven Simon and Raymond Lafragua-Creek. Photo: Ann Rogers, Newspix; Staff of the Central Australian Aboriginal Media Association (CAAMA): radio presenter Molly, film crew on location in the Northern Territory, and cameraman Warwick Thornton.



As part of its inquiry into Indigenous employment issues, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs Committee has been asked to examine “positive factors and examples amongst Indigenous communities and individuals which have improved employment outcomes in both the public and private sectors”. The committee is to recommend to the government ways this can inform future policy development, and to assess what significant factors have contributed to those positive outcomes identified, including what contribution practical reconciliation has made.

Committee Chair, Barry Wakelin, the Member for Grey (SA), said the committee’s focus on positive outcomes in Indigenous employment was the right approach.

“There’s probably as much to learn from those employment initiatives that fail Indigenous people,” he said, “but there seems to be a fair repeat factor in the failures and I think we’ll learn more from the positives, where it’s working, rather than where it hasn’t.”

The Committee’s Deputy Chair, the Member for Fremantle (WA),

Dr Carmen Lawrence, agreed it was best for the committee to look at positive outcomes in Indigenous employment.

Dr Lawrence said this was particularly true given that policy makers still couldn’t adequately define what programs actually improved the employment prospects of Indigenous Australians.

“With that in mind, [the committee] has turned the usual approach on its head and gone looking for examples of success,” said Dr Lawrence. “Employment initiatives that have failed Indigenous people have been well documented—there are many places where you can find what doesn’t work.

“We’re trying to find positive examples, but not so they can be applied everywhere—one of the lessons to be learned is that programs have to be tailored to the unique circumstances of each community and group you’re dealing with. There’s no ‘one size fits all’.

“And we won’t ignore material about what doesn’t work, particularly when it comes to the behaviour of governments. Rather we’re looking to see if we can assist communities by

providing them with examples of approaches and programs that seem to be working.”

Another enterprise to give evidence to the inquiry was the Alice Springs Desert Park, which has run a very successful Indigenous employment program for 10 years.

Twenty two per cent of the park’s staff are local Aboriginal people and, in a submission to the committee, Guide Manager Jodie Clarkson said the park was enriched by its Aboriginal employees, and those employees were enriched by employment at the park.

“The success of the program has built self esteem within (Indigenous employees) which has had a flow on effect to their families and community,” said Ms Clarkson.

Indigenous employees at the park agree. “The tourist industry is a pretty good industry to be involved in,” said Vincent Forrester, a guide at the park. “I can have 50 people at one talk. I can send 99.9 per cent of them away with smiles on their faces. I know I have done a good job. I get job satisfaction here every day, because it is a captive audience. I can do my thing. I can start educating

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Australians about their land, where they come from and what it means.

“Nothing gives young people more pride than earning an award wage—not sit-down money, not work for the dole, but award wage positions.”

“Nothing gives young people more pride than earning a wage.”

Another guide, Kylie Bloomfield, said being a park ranger serves as a good role model within the community. “When kids see you down the street, they’re singing out ‘ranger’ this, ‘ranger’ that especially when you go to the schools.”

In her submission, Ms Clarkson said Desert Park invested extra time and effort in the process of recruiting Indigenous employees. This included sending descriptions of vacant positions to an extensive email list of local Aboriginal organisations, families and individuals.

Ms Clarkson said that when a job came up at the park, traditional owners, local Aboriginal families and Aboriginal staff members were asked to inform their family networks. The park doesn’t advertise positions in December or January because many local Aboriginal people are involved in ceremonies at that time of year.

Desert Park has developed a uniquely sensitive approach to short listing and interviewing Indigenous candidates for the jobs it offers. According to Jodie Clarkson, if an Indigenous applicant doesn’t meet selection criteria for a job at the park, they’re contacted for a chat to assess whether their verbal skills are better than their written communication. If it’s then felt that the applicant met the selection criteria, they may be assisted to modify their application prior to an interview.

Job interviews at the park are conducted by a three person panel, including one Aboriginal who is either a staff member or a traditional owner. The interviews are conducted outside in a quiet, open area, or inside in a place with plenty of natural light.

“The most important thing we need to assess is the applicant’s interest in and commitment to the position,” said Ms Clarkson. “Individuals may be under pressure from families [to get a

job]. This is not a recipe for success for that individual, their family or the park.”

The Desert Park approach to Indigenous employment ensures that the best candidate gets the job, and once an Indigenous person is employed, every effort is made to retain them. All park staff undertake cross-cultural, Arrernte language and anti-discrimination training, and bush knowledge and skills are given equal status to western scientific knowledge at the park.

Jodie Clarkson said that one of the biggest employment challenges the park faced was overcoming problems of reliability and punctuality. “If you have grown up in a family where neither parent has had a job,” she said, “a work ethic can be a new concept.

“We ensure that new starters understand that the tourism industry works by the clock and that being late will upset your workmates and make the park look bad. A watch is part of our uniform and we provide one where necessary.

“Sometimes people think that if they are late or don’t turn up, they’ll get into trouble or lose their job and [they therefore] feel ashamed to call and let us know. We help them understand that they are allowed to be sick. We just need to know so that we can plan for it.”

Ms Clarkson said living and working within two cultures was a major challenge and it was sometimes necessary to help staff step between the demands of Western and Aboriginal culture. For instance, Aboriginal staff who are traditional owners or older men are sometimes ‘culturally superior’ to some other Aboriginal staff, and they may try to inappropriately delegate tasks where the ‘target’ or their delegating may feel culturally obliged to obey.

“We have also had to manage the implications of families involved in conflict [payback] in the workplace,” said Ms Clarkson. “We sought guidance from the involved parties and put them on opposite shifts until things settled down.

“We help staff understand why visitors ask ignorant, inappropriate and culturally offensive questions,” she said. “And we collectively develop non-defensive answers to these questions.”



Hugh Woodbury, ranger at the Alice Springs Desert Park.

Committee Deputy Chair, Dr Lawrence, said she was hopeful the inquiry into Indigenous employment could highlight half a dozen success stories, such as Desert Park and CAAMA. However Dr Lawrence said that once you began to examine Indigenous employment initiatives, you were inevitably drawn into the question of Indigenous education, which was often linked to health.

“The joined-up nature of these problems is illustrated in the successful programs because they don’t just deal with getting people to work on a particular day,” says Dr Lawrence. “They are much broader in scope.”

Asked why the committee had been asked to assess the particular contribution of ‘practical’ reconciliation to positive employment outcomes for Indigenous people, Committee Chair Barry Wakelin said the substance of practical reconciliation was more important than symbolism.

“Symbolic issues are part of the back drop, but the substance and the reality and how it makes a difference to an individual’s life is always going to win the day with me,” said Mr Wakelin. “The fundamentals must prevail. That is, it’s important to overcome disadvantage, to have an education, to live in a house where people get a decent night’s sleep, to have a decent diet and keep away from drug abuse.

“These things are more than symbolic and you can only do so much talking yourself up. What we’re about is looking at how people actually do it.”

One company that’s ‘doing it’ for Indigenous employment is Rio Tinto, particularly at its Argyle Diamonds subsidiary in Western Australia’s Kimberley region.

In the year 2000, Argyle Diamonds decided to recruit more workers from the Kimberley rather



CAAMA film crew.

opportunity to work side by side and engage in problem solving and team building exercises.

Argyle has now surpassed its 15 per cent target for Indigenous employment with local Aborigines now making up 23 per cent of its workforce. And it hopes that figure will reach 40 per cent by 2010.

Barry Wakelin says sections of Australia's corporate sector have some of their best people helping them engage

The park began life in the basement of a shopping centre in the small village of Kuranda near Cairns in 1987. It had seven Aboriginal employees at the time. All of them were performers.

Today, the 25-acre Tjapukai Aboriginal Cultural Park is a \$10 million facility. It employs 100 people, 85 of them Aborigines, and produces 40 shows and presentations a day. Aboriginal employees work in all areas of the park, including technical and management, customer service, reservations, retail, food and beverage, and administration.

The park is built on land owned by local Indigenous people, who also own a majority shareholding in the attraction. The rest of the shares are owned by Indigenous Business Australia and a number of non-Indigenous investors.

Tjapukai's Marketing Director, Judy Freeman, told the committee that since 1987 the park had contributed almost \$30 million to the Aboriginal community in profits, royalties, wages and the purchase of arts and artefacts. In recognition of that achievement, the park recently was awarded the Queensland Premier's Reconciliation Award for Business.

The park portrays all aspects of the Tjapukai tribe, from its dreamtime legends through to its life in contemporary Australia. Ms Freeman said the park had sparked cultural and language renewal in local Indigenous people, especially among the second generation of Tjapukai employees who were now entering the park work force.

"These children of the founders of Tjapukai have grown up with an understanding that commitment to excellence and reliable performance lead the way to success in the modern world," said Ms Freeman.

"Many members of the community who have worked as performers at Tjapukai have travelled the world, performing in 20 countries over 25 international tours," she said. "These travellers returned home with an expanded world view which has changed how this community sees itself and its place in the world." ■

The submissions and transcripts of public hearings for the Indigenous employment inquiry are available at www.aph.gov.au/house/committee/atsia or email atsia.reps@aph.gov.au or phone (02) 6277 4559.



Performance at the Tjapukai Aboriginal Cultural Park. Photo: Newspix

Living and working within two cultures was a major challenge.

than persist with a 'fly in-fly out' workforce based in Perth. Initially, it set a target of 30 per cent local employment by 2005, with a minimum of half of this—15 per cent of the workforce—to be Aboriginal people. At the time, less than 5 per cent of the Argyle workforce was Aboriginal.

Argyle overhauled its interview and recruitment process to ensure that it provided a culturally appropriate, but still robust assessment, of candidates' employability. It instigated a four day assessment program to give candidates and their potential employers the

with the Aboriginal community. "They want to bring these people forward and respect them," says Mr Wakelin. "But it's not all altruistic. In fact, in many cases it's engagement with a commercial purpose.

"These companies know that you have to work in the spirit of goodwill to achieve your commercial objectives and we've now got a corporate mindset that can see genuine commercial progress linked with good outcomes."

At its Cairns hearings, the committee heard of a brilliant outcome for Indigenous employment in evidence from the Tjapukai Aboriginal Cultural Park. Tjapukai Park is one of Australia's largest and most successful tourist attractions. It's also Australian tourism's largest employer of Aboriginal people.