

SENATE ESTIMATES OPENING STATEMENT BY NORTHERN LAND COUNCIL CEO  
- YUSEPH DEEN

Salutation

Good morning Chair and Senators

Today, I am joining you from the unceded lands of Turrbal and Yuggera people and pay honour to the ancestors of this country. I also pay respect to the custodians of the lands we are all joining from and acknowledge that this land as with the rest of this continent always was and always will be Aboriginal Land.

STATEMENT

The Northern Land Council is proud of its achievements representing the interests of Traditional Owners in the Top End of the Northern Territory through our statutory responsibilities.

NLC staff work tirelessly, ensuring the right people are in attendance, the right voices are heard and there is time for Traditional Owners to consider proposals when important decisions are being made about their land and seas.

SUNCABLE

On the 17<sup>th</sup> of November, the NLC, Traditional Owners, SunCable and government celebrated a landmark agreement for a solar generation site in Elliott. This landmark agreement shows what can happen through genuine engagement and partnership between Native Title holders and big business.

The NLC negotiated on behalf of a group of over 200 Walanypirri, Jangirulu and Bamayu Traditional Owners for more than three years.

This took over 70 consultations, thousands of kilometres travelled to ensure Traditional Owners could attend meetings in person, over 1500 phone calls and 11 days of sacred site clearance work. We are proud of the lengths our staff go to ensure free, informed prior consent.

The NLC was steadfast in its commitment to represent the Traditional Owners, and support them to negotiate terms that suited their families, their country and their children.

The end result is a 70-year agreement that will bring enormous benefits to Traditional Owner families and the Elliott region, with the hope of supplying renewable energy nationally and internationally.

ALRA

Next year we celebrate 50 years of the Aboriginal Land Rights Act in the NT.

The act, now more than ever, is critical to Aboriginal people in the NT - supporting them to manage their lands and to make informed decisions about what happens on their country.

STOKES HILL SACRED SITE

Earlier this year, the Northern Territory Government amended the NT Aboriginal Sacred Sites Act.

The government used the amendments to add two developers to a twenty-year old certificate that is meant to protect a Larrakia sacred site at Stokes Hill Wharf. There was no consultation with the Larrakia custodians and the developers proposal to build a multi-story hotel at the Darwin Waterfront.

The change to the original certificate means that the works can now go ahead without agreement of Larrakia custodians. This is a devastating result for the Larrakia people.

The amendment to the Act prioritises development over the protection of the Territory's most important cultural assets, putting the hard-fought rights of Aboriginal Territorians at risk. The amendments also go against the intention of Act.

The NLC is supporting appeals from senior Larrakia custodians to the federal government to safeguard this important sacred site against damage and desecration.

These amendments pose an unacceptable risk to not just to the Stokes Hill sacred site, but to all sacred sites across the NT. It will set a precedent for the NT Government to override sacred site protections and custodians' wishes without consultation.

#### GHOST NET INITIATIVE – CARING FOR COUNTRY

The Northern Land Council's Caring for Country program, has supported Traditional Owners across the Top End to manage land, sea, and cultural resources sustainably for over thirty years.

NLC Ranger programs have vast work areas with an inter-connected network of ranger groups that cover all of the NT coastline. They are uniquely capable and are often the first and only responders along the remotest parts of the northern coastline. They continue to provide an important service to the nation yet they remain under recognised and under resourced.

For the last three years, the Ghost Net Initiative has enabled the critical work of clearing marine debris.

In September this year, the NLC Yugul Mangi and Numbulwar Numburindi Rangers in South-East Arnhem Land cleared over 10 tonnes of plastic rubbish and ghost nets. They were helped on this occasion by Sea Shepherd Australia. The need for external volunteers highlights the gravity of the problem.

Marine debris causes immense damage to sea country and marine habitat and the work of the rangers makes a substantial difference to the health and viability of our fisheries stock and marine life

Support for the marine clean-up program ended in June this year, when funding for the Ghosts Net Initiative ceased.

**The pollution of our country including oceans, waterways and lands is a problem that doesn't end when funding ends.**

We call on the Commonwealth to urgently review this situation, and restore funding to support coastal ranger groups to continue their important work.

#### SUMMING UP

Lastly, next week is the first meeting of our new full council. The Council will guide the strategic direction of our organization as we proactively fight for the rights and interests of Aboriginal people throughout our region and proactively manage country.

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