

11 August 2020

BY EMAIL: jscna@aph.gov.au

The Joint Standing Committee on Northern Australia



Dear Sir/Madam

C/- Level 1, 345 King William Street
ADELAIDE SA 5000

RE: INQUIRY INTO DESTRUCTION OF THE 46,000 YEAR OLD CAVES AT JUUKAN GORGE

I am the chairperson of the Arabana Aboriginal Corporation RNTBC which is the Native Title Corporation representing over 1,000 Arabana People.

The Arabana Country over which our Native Title has been recognised, includes Kati Thanda – Lake Eyre and a significant area between Lake Torrens, Coober Pedy and Oodnadatta in South Australia.

To many, much of the country would appear to be desert, but to the Arabana it is a place of rich abundance of life. The thing that sustains that life, are what we call the mound springs, which are seepages at the southern edge of the Lake Eyre Basin. In our country there are over 6,000 of these springs and they are of great significance to the Arabana people.

These springs were created by our ancestors whose stories we know and respect, on whose water we depend for life, and on which the birds, plants and animals also depend.

The springs themselves can be as small as a cup or large enough that you could swim in them, however we don't because of the stories associated with them. To us, and to many Australians, they are a beautiful sight in a harsh environment.

Unfortunately, our springs are disappearing. How many have disappeared, we are not yet sure, but we are undertaking some research to find out just how many have actually disappeared. Springs that once bubbled out of the ground and people used for bathing, have disappeared in the last 20 years.

The cause of the disappearance of our springs, is water that is being taken from the Great Artesian Basin by BHP's mine at Roxby Downs. Each day they take 35 million litres of water from our springs and the Great Artesian Basin and now they wish to increase that amount to 42 million litres per day.

We are told that this will continue for at least the next 60 years. Given the number of springs that have disappeared, in 60 years we have a great fear that there will be none left whatsoever.

The Arabana People have tasked me and the Board of Directors of the Corporation to protect the springs. The big question is how.

Our lawyer tells us that under the South Australian Aboriginal Heritage Act, there is no way that the protection of the springs can be guaranteed. Under the South Australian Heritage Act, the Minister for Aboriginal Affairs can authorise the destruction of our springs. The only requirement is that he must call a meeting and consult with us, before giving BHP the authorisation to continue to take water and destroy our springs.

Given the amount of money involved in royalties from BHP, I do not see that the State Government is going to make a priority of protecting our springs and our culture. I have grave fears that the Minister will do what they did at Hindmarsh Island and allow the destruction of our springs.

I have asked our lawyer about the Commonwealth Government protecting our springs. He has advised us that the Commonwealth has the power to do it, but it is rarely, if ever, used. He should know this because he acted for the Ngarrindjeri Women during the Hindmarsh Island Bridge Affair in which the Commonwealth Parliament went so far as to take the area of the bridge outside of the Commonwealth Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Heritage Act and allow for the destruction of the Site.

Unless something is done by the Commonwealth, our springs will disappear and with them will disappear the unique flora and fauna that live in and around these springs. There are many endemic and endangered species of plants, fish and birds that depend on these springs, and they too will disappear.

The beauty of the springs alone would be enough for most people to protect them, but when you add our dependence and connection to those springs, the stories that we have and the enjoyment and use that we make of the springs, I believe all Australians would want to save them.

So that you can understand some of the beauty of the springs, I attach a number of photographs of some that remain, although they are significantly reduced in flow and will probably be extinct well before the 60 years is up. I also attach a photo of an extinct spring so that you can understand our concern.

I would therefore urge you to enquire into what is happening with water in the Great Artesian Basin and the use of it not just by BHP but by the Pastoral and Petroleum Industry before our springs, like the caves, disappear. It is unsustainable, destructive of nature, and destructive of our culture to allow the springs to die. Will you please enact laws that ensure our mound springs and Culture are recognised, respected and protected?

Yours faithfully,

ARABANA ABORIGINAL CORPORATION RNTBC

Per

Brenda Underwood
Chairperson



Image 1 – Boopechie Springs – Finnis Springs Station



Image 2 – Beatrice Springs – Finnis Springs Station



Image 3 – Hergott Spring – Marree



Image 4 – Now extinct spring – Near Beatrice Spring – Finniss Springs Station