



November 16, 2012

Dr Anna Dacre
Committee Secretary
House of Representatives Standing Committee
on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs
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Parliament House
CANBERRA, ACT 2600
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Dear Dr Dacre,

Re: Submission to Inquiry into the contribution of sport to Indigenous wellbeing and mentoring

Thank you for the opportunity to submit to this Inquiry. This submission is being made on behalf of two organisations who are working in partnership to deliver sport and recreation programs in the Pilbara: Newcrest Mining Limited (Community Relations Department) and the Western Desert Sports Council.

The Shire of East Pilbara in Western Australia is the largest local government area in the world covering nearly 380,000 square kilometres. It is over 1,000 km from west to east and up to 400 km from north to south. The Shire is larger than the state of Victoria and much of it is desert including the Western Desert area.

Newcrest Mining Limited operates the Telfer gold mine in the remote Western Desert area, 500km inland from Port Hedland. The communities closest to Telfer are spread across the Shire and are some of the most remote in Australia. They include Punmu, Parngurr, Kunawarritji, Kiwirkurra, Jigalong, Nullagine, Warralong, and the township of Marble Bar.

These communities generally exist in a state of welfare dependency. The three things that the community can control and take responsibility for are their law, their funerals, and their sport.

- Providing the background to the development of organised sport in the region;
- Describing the newly-created Western Desert Sports Council (WDSC), an incorporated association which aims to increase opportunities for healthy lifestyle and increased participation in sport and recreational activities;
- Outlining the importance of sport and the contribution of sport and recreation programs to improved outcomes for Indigenous people in this region;
- Outlining the specific contribution of these programs to Closing the Gap targets;
- Describing an innovative partnership in the Western Desert between sport and music.

Background of sport in the area

Sport in the Martu communities has changed very little since the 1970s. Sport, namely football, softball and basketball were introduced partly by the few primary schools that existed eg Jigalong, Nullagine, Marble Bar and by students returning from high school in Port Hedland to their communities. Over the years sport was part of some of the schools' curriculum but not in any way coordinated across the Martu communities. The state schools in Jigalong, Nullagine and Marble Bar and the community schools of Punmu, Kunawarritji, Parngurr and Warralong have never cooperated formally in regards to sport development or organisation. Sports carnivals including athletics and swimming have been conducted but not on a regular basis nor across all the communities.

At the community level football, basketball and softball gradually became established among the young adults in the 1980s and 1990s with football becoming by far the main sport played and supported in the region. These sports were played intermittently and on an adhoc basis with little or no forward planning and with no ongoing development either in the sports themselves or in the officiating of the sports.

In the 1990s the Department of Sport and Recreation attempted to promote and support the further development and organisation of sport and recreation in the Martu communities by basing a development officer in the region. Although initially working well sport has still not developed much further than in the 1980s. This lack of development, particularly for women and children, but also in football was mainly due to:

- Lack of trained personnel in schools to develop, run and coordinate sport and events.
- Lack of sports programs in schools.
- Lack of continuity of programs due to planning and movement of staff in schools and community.

- Lack of cooperation between schools and community, between schools -- independent and state, and between communities themselves.
- A lack of understanding within the communities themselves about the value of sport, physical activity and healthy lifestyles, and a lack of willingness from the Government to provide the required funds.

This lack of planning, staffing, cooperation and coordination caused Martu sport to stagnate and by association Martu health to suffer for many years.

With experience of the region and its sport, research and consultation with Garnduwa (a frontrunner in the organisation of remote Indigenous sports in Australia) and support of the Martu it was determined that if sport development, organisation and participation was to improve, the essential first step was to identify and establish the support mechanisms that are required for a cooperative and coordinated 'across communities' program involving the schools, the community management, the Government and non-Government agencies.

With support established, the next step would be to develop a Martu planned program that would not only lead to sports organisation and events but would demonstrate that it is possible to promote, develop, organise, fund and operate a sustainable sport and recreation program across the Martu communities.

In 2009, with this in mind, Newcrest invited people from the communities to attend the Martu Sport Supporters Group, the first of a series of meetings to assist the Martu to develop the Martu Communities Sport and Recreation Plan. These meetings were held regularly from 2009.

The Western Desert Sports Council – providing structure for sport in the region

From this beginning, the Western Desert Sports Council (WDSC) gradually took shape and in early 2012 achieved incorporation under the Associations Incorporation Act (1987). The aim of the WDSC is to improve the level of sport and recreation programs for Indigenous communities in the Western Desert region of the Pilbara. In the two years prior to incorporation the group met regularly and established a successful Western Desert League (the Carnivals held three times each year) as the basis for planned expansion of sport and recreation programs.

WDSC's objectives (Constitution, Rule 3) include:

- The development, promotion and participation of sport, physical activity and cultural programs leading to improved health and lifestyles of the Martu people.
- The control and management of Australian Rules Football played by the Western Desert Football League.
- The control and management of Softball played by the Western Desert Softball League.
- To arrange all matches played by any representative team of the Council.
- The selection of all representative teams and officials.

WDSC has the vision to become the peak Indigenous sporting body in the Western Desert region of WA. It sees its role as contributing to healthy lifestyles of Indigenous people in the Western Desert through planning, organisation and facilitation of a sustainable sport and recreation program across the Martu communities. WDSC is a unique partnership between eight Martu communities who work together to develop an integrated regional program of sport and recreation activities.

The overall goal of the WDSC is to achieve improvements in health and wellness through lifestyle changes and new habits, enabling the Martu to experience the benefits of improved health. In broad terms WDSC works at two levels with its indigenous communities:

- To achieve behavioural change to lead to improved health outcomes for Martu people in the east Pilbara; and
- To support capacity development among Martu people in these communities.

The first will be achieved through improved facilities, programs, staffing and communication; the second will be achieved through employment and training. Importantly, the WDSC has been able to focus on ensuring that the needs of women are acknowledged: that women should be involved in sport; that decisions are not just to be made on men's sport; and that the needs of the whole community including people of all ages are considered.

Among a range of activities aimed to increase community participation in sport, recreation and cultural activities leading to a healthier lifestyle, the Western Desert Sports Council holds three Carnivals each year which attract up to 1000 participants and attendees from the eight communities. The model that WDSC is working towards includes the following:

Intra-community activity: Establishing resources at community level to run activities and programs, to get people active and to build skills and participation levels at a steady incremental rate. The WDSC seeks funding support through grant applications. The

community level activity is planned with the communities so it accommodates the interest of both men and women, and offers something for all age groups. This requires the development of a Community Sport and Rec plan for each of the eight communities, prepared through a consultative process.

Inter-community activity: Once this is in place, the communities can then meet more regularly to play sport, with the introduction at some point of a structured competition with regular fixtures. A current proposal to seek funding support to establish a grassed oval at one of the communities would create a sought-after regional resource that would be used by all.

Regional activity: The organisation of key events during the year such as the Western Desert League Carnivals for football, softball and basketball provide a focus for sport, recreational and cultural activities. Other regional initiatives including visits by elite athletes, and travel by representative teams to compete against other regions. This model creates clear development pathways to higher levels of participation at all levels of sport. Existing partnerships with V Swans and Softball WA aim to provide intermediate steps between regional level sport and elite level.

In these early days of operation, the WDSC is being supported by two Executive Officers who are Newcrest's Indigenous Sports Development Officers (ISDOs). It is anticipated that, within five years, the WDSC will have its own Executive Director and staff, subject to funding. The ISDOs, half funded through the Department of Sport and Recreation, deliver sport and recreation programs in communities on a rostered basis. This includes monthly community visits for sporting activities, visits to Telfer to use the sport and recreation facilities there, and running Learn to Swim programs.

Health promotion is an integral part of all activity in terms of demonstrating the value of nutrition and physical activity, and promoting social responsibility for health, empowering individuals and strengthening community capacity.¹

The importance of sport in these Indigenous communities

Sport is important in Indigenous communities for several reasons:

Sport offers the opportunity for enjoyment:

- It is fun and physical
- It builds self-esteem and participation

¹ Department of Health & Ageing (2010), *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Performance Framework: 2010 Report*, Australian Government, Canberra, p. 142

- It creates a sense of achievement

Sport embodies community development for community members:

- They learn about the games and the rules of the games
- Through playing sport, indigenous kids learn about co-operation and teamwork which are skills they will take with them into the workplace.
- Capacity-building also takes place within the WDSC Board. Board members are elected representatives of the eight communities. The WDSC provides opportunity for these elected representatives to self-organise which leads to personal growth.
- It provides the opportunity to learn about and practice responsibility:

Sport allows everyone to become involved:

- AFL in particular is good because it is played on a big oval, big enough that cultural restrictions can be accommodated.

How WDSC is targeting Closing The Gap

WDSC's aim is to show a positive effect on physical and mental wellbeing as a result of its sport and recreation programs, and to document the outcomes for better understanding of how such programs can help to improve Indigenous health and wellbeing.

Reference documents for the work of the WDSC include:

- The *National Strategic Framework for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health 2003 – 2013* (NSFATSIH) signed in 2003
- The *National Partnership Agreement on Closing the Gap in indigenous Health Outcomes*² also identifies preventative health as a key priority area.
- COAG's Closing The Gap documentation (2012) which identifies seven building blocks that will lead to improving the lives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people³, one of which is health. All building blocks are underpinned by the importance of promoting strong indigenous cultures, heritage and language which support strong cultural identity.

² COAG (2008), *National Partnership Agreement on Closing The Gap in Indigenous Health Outcomes*, accessed on <http://www.coag.gov.au>

³ Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet (date unknown), *Culture and Closing The Gap*, Australian Government, Canberra. Accessed on <http://www.arts.gov.au/indigenous>

Closing The Gap recognises that sport can be used to promote healthy lifestyles among indigenous children. Improved levels of physical activity levels present a significant opportunity for closing the gap in indigenous disadvantage in terms of improved health outcomes.

At this stage, what can be tracked in the communities is the participation rates by different sectors of the community, with encouragement to gradually increase the levels of participation.

Closing The Gap identifies the following aspects which have not been fully researched at this stage⁴:

- How to transfer a successful program from one community to another;
- The long-term effects of these programs on the health of participants;
- Whether sport promotion programs increase participation among Indigenous children and adults; and
- What strategies are effective to promote participation in sport by older men, and by adult and older women.

Some of these areas are directly relevant to WDSC's activities and can be monitored to gather data and contribute to greater understanding. WDSC is keen to influence the level of physical activity to achieve a change in health conditions in remote indigenous communities.

There is also a growing body of research supporting the community view that positive outcomes stem from keeping culture strong⁵. As people begin to feel more empowered and connected, this builds their self-esteem and leads them to make better choices. The indicator is increased level of social participation. The evidence base for this approach comes from the work of Chandler & Lalonde⁶ who have studied the importance of cultural continuity and connection to culture.

Innovation: the Western Desert alliance between sport and music

Another organisation which is active in the Pilbara is Desert Feet Inc (DFI), a not for profit, membership based organisation that provides music education, recording and

⁴ Closing The Gap Clearing House (Jan 2012), *Healthy Lifestyle Programs for Physical Activity and Nutrition*, Resource Sheet # 9, p.2

⁵ Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet (date unknown), *Culture and Closing The Gap*, Australian Government, Canberra. Accessed on <http://www.arts.gov.au/indigenous>

⁶ Chandler & Lalonde (2003), "Cultural Continuity as a Moderator of Suicide Risk Among Canada's First Nation", to appear in: Kirmayer, L. & Valaskakis, G. (Eds.). *The Mental Health of Canadian Aboriginal*, Vancouver: UBC Press.

concerts and promotes promote music, dance and performing arts to children in remote Indigenous communities through the Desert Feet Tours (DFT).

DFT and WDSC have established a strategic partnership which sees DFT invited to attend the three Carnivals each year to provide music workshops, and music recording and performing opportunities. This assists the WDSC to ensure that cultural activities are provided for those who aren't participating in the sporting activities. This arrangement has been confirmed for the next three years which means that DFT will attend the next nine Carnivals.

When DFT attends the WDSC Carnivals it runs music workshops, music tuition, recording of local musicians, and performance opportunities. DFT arrives with a fully-equipped professional stage and sound system, and a tour group of well-known Indigenous and non-Indigenous musicians. In addition, local musicians and bands have the opportunity to perform.

The value of music in strengthening health and wellbeing is documented in two papers: *Culture and Closing The Gap* and the *Indigenous Contemporary Music Action Plan* which states: *"It's an art form that has the power to draw young Indigenous Australians into education and training programs. Making music is strengthening pride in culture, language and history, and Indigenous Australians' contribution to Australia's mainstream culture"* (p. 1).

In addition to 'keeping culture strong', music and art are a means to give young people a sense of self-efficacy and self-control – factors which are critical to social and emotional wellbeing.

The partnership approach with WDSC brings music and sport together – the only current partnership of this type in WA that we are aware of (although Garnduwa in the Kimberley have incorporated both elements in past programs).

Both organisations are focussed on the determinants of health, as any changes in health determinants are necessary to bring about changes in health outcomes. The health outcome of social and emotional wellbeing is a holistic and multi-dimensional concept related to individual, family and community experience. Social participation is a measure that indicates social and emotional wellbeing. While the WDSC is keen to influence the level of physical activity to achieve a change in health conditions in remote indigenous communities, DFT's aim is to show a positive effect on health and mental wellbeing as a result of its music program.

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The joint and combined approaches of sport and music are a good demonstration of the use of culturally relevant methods of engagement. The creation of music by children in the community can be used to reinforce positive lifestyle messages and the children put their own themes about healthy lifestyles, culture, and self-expression into music and performance.

DFI and WDSC have developed a proposal for a three-year research project to develop an evidence base that can be used in the development of future social participation programs. Unfortunately a recent funding approach to the State Government through its Social Innovations Fund was unsuccessful and funding is still being sought.

I trust this information assists the Committee in its Inquiry.

Yours sincerely,



Léon van Erp /

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Inaugural Chair, Western Desert Sports Council



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