

Project Synopsis

Project commencement:	2005
Project completion:	December 2008
Total project investment:	\$130,000

'Return to the land'

Project Aim

For thousands of years the North West Kimberley coast was home to four Indigenous groups - Mayala, Dambimangari, Unguu and Balangarra. During this time these groups shared their stories and experiences through dialogue and story telling.

"Many of the groups along the North West Kimberley Coast were completely isolated. During World War Two many of these groups were moved by police into settlements for safety. In many cases once the war was over it became too hard for the groups to return to the land," said project manager Mr Tom Vigilante.

"As time passed many of these groups were unable to retain and pass on their knowledge to following generations. Now over 80 percent of the land has been claimed as native reserve and the rest has remained native title," Vigilante said.

Today the original homelands of the traditional owners are becoming tourism destinations for large cruise boats due to their cultural significance and connection to the war.

"We saw the need to provide the traditional owners the opportunity to return to their land and provide them with the tools to recapture the culture they were losing. The Saltwater Country Project aimed to provide these groups with this opportunity and encourage them to create a sustainable living off the land," Vigilante said.

The Saltwater Country Project was contracted by Rangelands NRM WA and coordinated by the Kimberley Land Council Land & Sea Unit and the Department of Indigenous Affairs.

Key Outcomes:

- Increase knowledge sharing of Aboriginal culture / values.
- Development of tourism facilities.

The Challenge

To address the concerns of retaining Indigenous knowledge and to ensure traditional landowners' interests are valued in the face of unprecedented industry development, the project established a Saltwater Steering Committee consisting of four North Kimberley coastal native title claim groups: Mayala, Dambimangari, Unguu and Balangarra.

During the committee meeting the traditional owners identified the broad issues relating to natural and cultural resource management in the coastal and marine region. They also identified priority areas for sea trips to be undertaken as part of this project.

"Many of the places we visit are not accessible by road. The area we have prioritised is approximately the distance of the NSW coast. In some cases we are only able to return to the country by means of boat and plane and this can be very expensive," said Mr. Vigilante.



Our Successes

Since the commencement of the program over 200 Indigenous Australians have been involved in the program and returned to the country.

“We have had overwhelming support for this project. Grandparents, parents and children have returned to their lands and have been provided with the opportunity to learn in situ (on location) – something they previously could not do,” said Mr. Vigilante.

By returning to their traditional lands, project participants have conserved traditional knowledge needed for the management of natural and cultural resources.

“Whenever we conduct a return to country trip we use western recording techniques. From the information collected we have created educational materials to educate Indigenous Australians about their culture from the perspective of an Indigenous elder,”

“We hope this project increases the desire for others to return to the country and live on the land again,” said Tom Vigilante.

Benefits to the Kimberley Community

Since the commencement of the project the following outcomes have been achieved:

- Over 200 Indigenous Australians have been involved in the program and returned to the land.
- Greater understanding of Indigenous culture and knowledge.
- Increased in situ (on location) learning for Indigenous Australians.
- Increased economic benefits from tourism / knowledge sharing.
- Development of tourism facilities (paths, information etc.)

This project was made possible through assistance from:

- Rangelands NRM WA
- Australian Government
- Western Australian Government
- Kimberley Land Council

For further information:

John Silver
Program Manager
Rangelands NRM WA
(08) 9941 9743
johns@rangelandswa.com.au
www.rangelandswa.com.au

Tom Vigilante
Project Manager
Land & Sea Unit
Kimberley Land Council
(08) 9193 1118
Tom.vigilante@klc.org.au

