

Wangan and Jagalingou Traditional Owners Council

Return to Country (July 2017)

Researchers' Report to Families

In July 2017, members of the Wangan and Jagalingou Traditional Owners Council (W&J) held a major 'Gathering on Country.' You were part of this historic event!

The meeting at Clermont, on Wangan Country in Central Queensland, was likely the first gathering of representatives of all the families together on Country since the forced and often violent removal that occurred from around the mid to late 1800s. This was a powerful and immediate expression of your claim to the traditional lands and waters of your ancestors, and organised on your terms. As part of the two-day Council meeting in Clermont, a plaque was laid in the town to mark your continued connection to Country. And, of course, a trip was undertaken to the sacred Doongmabulla Springs where connection to Country was re-affirmed through ceremony.

This report is written for all those who attended this historic event, and their families. It briefly documents, in dot point form, some of the key issues and themes that emerged during this event as recorded by the researchers and film crew. It also includes some quotes from those of you who kindly agreed to be interviewed, or who wrote your ideas down to share with us. These include transformative experiences as a result of the trip to Country, the meanings you inscribe in your ancestral homeland, opposition to Adani's proposed Carmichael coal mine, and the important role of the Council. Perhaps most importantly, it provides a record of your hopes for the future, for both the Council and your Country, as laid out on this trip.

The Journey



1. You understand that your ancestors have distinct law, and you know that your families have been in Central Queensland a long time, that colonisation of country was not that long ago by comparison, and there is collective memory of this place before violent colonisation.
2. Your families have stood strong in the face of violent colonisation. You have

risen above the forced removal from country as part of the frontier violence that defines this landscape, and the associated pain and suffering this history has caused.

3. On the basis of your connection (and historical suffering caused by colonisation), you understand you have a right to say what happens on this Country.
4. Many of your family members are learning more (about themselves and their family), and are engaged in a journey that includes what Uncle Norman Johnson described as both "soul searching and library searching" to uncover more about where you are from and your family histories.
5. Many of you have family members buried around this area.

6. You have waited a long time to be here, and this trip to country is a first for many of you.
7. Some family members have fought for this country (Australia), and now you are fighting for protection of your Country.

Motivations for Being Part of this Event



8. To walk on the land, and have a connection to Country.
9. An educational opportunity, especially for your young people, to learn more about family backgrounds, and who you are. As Kiara Fisher described: "I am here to learn about my culture and my background. My great great great great grandfather from WW1 was born here, it will be great to find out and learn about him as well".
10. To learn so as to pass important cultural knowledge onto the next generation, and in so doing, to support them to be prepared in life.
11. To share the experience of being on Country with family, and with elders.
12. As Nicole Clevens stated, being on Country "means claiming my rightful inheritance".

The Transformative Experience of Being on Country



13. This was an opportunity to connect to family and to Country. Just about everyone described feeling very happy and proud to be on Country, as well as having a deep sense of gratitude for this opportunity, which has made you stronger. Rosetta Williams' heartfelt thanks demonstrated this: "From the bottom of my heart, thank you for welcoming me in and telling me stories about the dreamtime, of how our people used to live off the land. I feel so proud to have been out there, and learning from you elders".
14. Many of you described missing something until you came here, and that the trip has helped you to fill a void, to heal, and to bring new meaning to your lives.
15. Many of you described learning so much from the trip, and from Adrian in particular, who shared his knowledge and perspectives.
16. This trip enabled you to learn more about where you are from, and importantly, where you are going as a group.
17. The trip was especially significant for young people, who described a door opening, and their desire to learn more about their culture and family history. As Janae Bobongie explained: "This is a really great opportunity to

come out to see and learn where I am from. I have learnt more in half an hour when Adrian was speaking about the land and the stories about the dreamtime, than I have learnt in a while”.

18. The ceremony was especially important, including watching the dancers kick up the dust, to walk in the soft sand and through the smoke; “I was honoured by the younger generation, dancing and singing for us all, and welcoming us back onto our Country. The ancestor spirits came and took over the dancers and became one with us all. For the first time in my 75 and a half years, I was able to be smoked and cleansed on my own land. My tears flowed, and my heart was near bursting with pride” (Aunty Lester Barnard).
19. The trip also enabled many of you to see the land differently, and to truly value what you see, including to see the diversity and richness held within the land.
20. It also affirmed a responsibility for some of you, to protect Country, including for future generations. You shared your worries about the climate, the Great Barrier Reef, the future of food, and the interconnections of these environmental and social challenges, and your responsibility in this context.
21. Some of you described Australia’s history of resource extractivism, and that it simply cannot continue, as well as the urgent need to move away from reliance upon the failing coal industry.
22. The trip to Country also gave a sense of belonging to you that no one can take away, with many of you describing now knowing you are part of something very big. And as Barbara Broome explained: “When I went out there, to me it was like mecca, a

special place. This is a mecca for us, for the W&J and anyone who wants to share”.

Connection to Country



23. There were many shared and common experiences associated with the return to Country, including feeling peaceful, calm and happy, but also with acknowledgement and respect of the violent history of this land. As Delia Kemmpi explained: “It felt really great to me to be on my grandmother’s land. And to be there with the other people, who are now my brothers and sisters. It was great to be part of this, to share laughs and talks, to share life. We are just so happy, like one big family”.
24. For some the return to Country was like a calling, and like coming home and into your own house. Others described a spark in this connection, and signs from the ancestors that indicated they were happy you were there. As Lizzie McAvoy explained: “It’s about coming out here and reconnecting to Country, all of us. You know we have all been away from here a long time. You know its reconnecting back to Country. And knowing who you are”.
25. Linda Bobongie also explained: “I now know I have my physical connection and my right to Country. And it’s not through the fake unacceptable view that native title

gives me or my family connection, I now have my real connection. I claim my place, for my people, and my sovereignty. I have gained strength and unity from this trip back to Country, like never before, with my countrymen and women. This visit to me has been like a re-birth, because we came here united, with love in our hearts and in our spirits. I will finish by saying how palpable it is being given your belonging by your people, and not by native title. My great grandmother gave me my connection and my belonging to Country. And it was sealed yesterday through a spiritual connection, through my country men and women, and through country and spirit. Thank you for that”.

26. Many of you described the importance of drinking the water at Doongmabulla Springs, of walking on Country in the footsteps of your ancestors, of being smoked, and of bathing in your waters. Some described these as spiritual experiences, and as cleansing, especially for those women and girls who got into the water. Sarah McAvoy described: “I just needed to jump in the water, you feel so refreshed, and I needed to be part of it. I was so ready to jump in the water. It was unbelievable to be out there, I wish we could stay longer. We need to do this more in the future”.
27. For many, you described knowing who you are because you know where you come from, and the significance of the trip in realising this.
28. The Country was also described by you as your spiritual heartland, your life source, and as giving you a sense of purpose and belonging in life. Just as some people have religion, you described the land as your bible.

29. There was also a strong conviction that Aboriginal people should be acknowledged and respected for this connection to land, not simply seen as a barrier to the go-ahead of a mine.
30. There is a deep conviction that this land must be protected for future generations, and that vital resources such as the ochre cannot be lost.
31. You recognise and value that you have a right to say no, including to the proposed Adani mine. For many of you, the trip to Country furthered your resolve to fight to protect your Country from the proposed mine.
32. Coedie McAvoy expressed this resolve: “Our protection of country comes down to our own self-belief, of what we believe in as W&J people. If we believe we have to hold something sacred in our country, then there needs to be some area that we hold sacred, that connects us to our Aboriginal religion. It’s not so much a religion, but our dream time stories about creation. Corrobboree grounds, and scar trees, these things tie together and make our aboriginal mythology, or religion. If you leave one part out, it doesn’t connect up. You can’t say you are Aboriginal and you love Country and turn around and sign your land away to a company that is going to destroy your Country”.

The Importance of Family and the W&J Family Council



33. You all described the importance of family, including the sense of pride that comes from being part of family. The trip to Country provided you with more education that you will pass onto your family, which you described as important in continuing to strengthen your families' over time.
34. The trip was also important in terms of bringing families together, forming closer ties, as well as simply sharing life together. Importantly too, it provided an opportunity to further build your alliance to oppose the proposed Adani mine.
35. The Family Council has strong support, and was described as a very important forum for ensuring independence, autonomy and self-respect for its members. It was also recognised as very successful in fundraising. There is deep pride in the Council and all it has achieved, and recognition of its importance in creating an organisational entity for collective power and organising.
36. Adrian Burragubba and Murrawah Johnson were acknowledged for their outstanding role as spokespeople for the Council, with deep thanks and respect for their efforts. There was acknowledgement they carry a burden for the Council in their role, including bearing the brunt of attacks the Council receives. As well as strong accolades, there was acknowledgement that the Council backed Adrian and Murrawah 100%, especially in their efforts to stop the Adani mine.
37. There is strong support for the Council's campaign to stop the proposed Adani coal mine. Many young people described not having much prior knowledge of the work of the Council in fighting Adani, and as such the weekend played a vital role

in increasing young people's knowledge of the campaign. As Nathan Baira described after learning more about the fight to protect Country "It's mad"; words that capture how blown away he, and many others are, by the work being done as part of the fight to protect Country.

38. While the Council provides a platform to come together to stop the proposed mine on Country, there was recognition it also does so much more. Importantly, the Council is described as forging new ground; by breaking away from Native Title and ILUA processes, and instead bringing people together based on principles of self-organisation and autonomy, as well as centring Aboriginal law in charting pathways for the future. You expressed how this approach enables you to avoid wasting time in what many of you describe as the broken system of native title, and instead create opportunities for empowerment, learning and cultural expression (including dancing, and learning about culture) outside a system that fails Aboriginal people.

Opposition to Adani's Mine



39. The proposal to build a mine on your Country is causing emotional anguish for many of you. It has also caused division and conflict within, and across, families.

40. Many of you have significant knowledge of Adani and its poor corporate conduct, including the devastating impacts of its mine and port operations for people and the environment in India. Many of you also have detailed knowledge of the coal industry, including awareness that the market for coal is in decline, and that the proposed coal mine on your Country simply doesn't make economic sense.
41. Many of you also describe Adani's proposed mine as delivering no benefits for local people, and certainly not for Aboriginal people. The rhetoric around the proposed mine is understood as lies (including related to employment opportunities), and the State Government's granting to Adani of unlimited access to groundwater is described as madness. As Liam McAvoy described: "If this Country is destroyed, where will animals get their water? The spring creates life, if you take that away, there won't be a creation of our animals. This is where they have been living, and will be for years to come. We don't want that water supply cut off".
42. The go ahead of Adani's mine would be devastating; you describe that it would destroy your history, end your life source and dreaming, and turn your Country into a wasteland. It would, you describe, mark the end of who you are as people. In the face of this, you describe your obligation to protect and conserve your country, as well as distinguishing between conservation and custodianship.
43. Gary Fisher described: "What kind of future will there be if this mine goes ahead? I am all for Adrian and the Council going against the mine. We have to make sure there is something

here for the next generation to say, well, this is our ancestral homeland. We don't want to come here and find a hole. The only hole we want is a water hole!".

44. Many of you are heartened by the wide scale opposition to the mine from around Australia, and suggest it must be only the Government and Adani left actually wanting it to go ahead.

The Future



45. Young people, in particular, describe seeing things differently on the basis of the trip to Country, including having come to see the land as rich with stories and meaning. You are deeply grateful for this opportunity, including coming to understand you are part of something much bigger, and something which you can be immensely proud of. There was much interest and support amongst young people for the Youth Council, including the opportunities it might provide to build capacity for young people to have greater involvement in the broader Council into the future.
46. You are committed to stopping Adani's proposed mine on your Country. You see an important role for the Council in providing support to create meaningful and long term real jobs for your people.

47. You are also clear that it's not simply a case of rejecting the mine on your Country. Rather, you describe your global responsibilities and the need to ensure everybody's rights and interests are respected. You recognise the need for community based development to move in new directions, and your vital role in taking the lead in this regard.
48. You are supportive of the expansion of future industries and employment opportunities that look after the land, including natural industries, renewables, and other activities that match up with keeping your land safe. You have many ideas for economic development, including bee keeping, growing trees, ecotourism, and the creation of sustainable industries for kids.
49. You also aspire for the further expansion of a cultural development program, including on-going trips to Country, thereby enabling your culture to be shared with others. There is a vital recognition of the need to get kids out on Country as part of ensuring the younger generations learn and are able to carry on the legacy.
50. There is an enduring commitment to ensure the Council stays strong, and that it expands its work so as to deliver positive outcomes that enable your people to enjoy the same fundamental social, cultural, economic and civil rights as all Australians.