

‘Putting a face to the picture’

Central Desert women talk about their health, their housing and the land

February 2020



Figure 1: Still from the *Desert Women's Project* (2020), <https://gci.uq.edu.au/central-desert-women-housing-and-health>

Summary

This project was undertaken to document Aboriginal women's experiences of remote living, and their views on how housing and crowding affects the health of their families. It details, in the residents' own words, their positive stories and remaining challenges.

A video was filmed on Arrente country in Central Northern Territory, in the outstations of Black Tank and Williams Well. It is available online at <https://gci.uq.edu.au/central-desert-women-housing-and-health>.

The film was devised, developed and filmed by Wendy Anders, an Arrente woman, and Professor Sandra Creamer AM, a Waanyi and Kalkadoon woman.

“Central Desert women, housing and health” is a sub project within the UQ-led project on ‘Enhancing Australian Indigenous health and wellbeing through community-led environmental, social and infrastructural systems solutions’. This project was funded by the UQ Global Change Institute's Flagship Fund.

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The need for this project

This project aimed to document women's experiences of remote living, and their views on how housing and crowding affects the health of their families. Professor Sandra Creamer and Wendy Anders undertook this project to document the issues in two outstations located outside Alice Springs in the Northern Territory, Williams Well and Black Tank. It critically analyses the lack of water, housing and issues of health in these two outstations where under the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights which states everyone has the right to an adequate standard of living including adequate water and housing to continuous improvement of living conditions.

The leading national and international health bodies such as the World Health Organisation and the United Nations all agree that safe drinking water is essential to sustain life, and a prerequisite for the realisation of other human rights.¹ The UN General Assembly explicitly recognises the human right to clean drinking water.² Having access to sufficient, safe, accessible and affordable drinking water is an important public health issue.³

The result is a snapshot of the outstations. Many separate outstations were formed from established communities for various cultural or clan reasons. Whilst these outstations are small and family owned, they represent the issues faced by many other Aboriginal communities across Australia. Issues such as Inadequate housing, overcrowding and structural deficiencies. The communities share many of these problems, due their common experiences of remoteness, the legacy of chronic under-funding for housing, infrastructure and services.

Community 1: Williams Well

Williams Well is a small community located 56 Kilometres from Alice Springs. This outstation is the traditional homelands of one family. The community consists of 4 dwellings, 1 shower block (no bath) which includes a laundry with one washing machine. The shower block and laundry are situated meters from the dwellings. Only one dwelling has an inside toilet and laundry. The other 3 dwellings are built on an open plan, with one enclosed room in the centre of the dwelling with the kitchen and living area open to the environment.

This type of dwelling was considered by past elders and members of the community as a transition between country living to living in dwellings. However, over time this model of housing has become redundant and is not considered appropriate for the people who wish to live on country now.

Only one dwelling has a Traditional Owner elder living in it and the other two have family members who have chosen to live on their homelands and one dwelling is vacant. Whilst the other family and community members would prefer to live on their country it is not possible due to health issues. The two dwellings occupied by family belong to elderly ladies who are undergoing dialysis and cannot live at Williams Well. One of the women recently passed and has passed the dwelling on to her Nephew and his partner. The other is occupied by a cousin and her partner.

The Elder just before she passed asked her family to take her home, but the family could not bring her home due to the numerous issues associated with providing adequate care. The members of the community and family are saddened that they could not grant this last wish to their elder.

¹ Australian Medical Association – Close the clean drinking water gap - <https://ama.com.au/ausmed/close-clean-drinking-water-gap>

² ibid

³ ibid

Aboriginal people have a different understanding of 'home' than non-Aboriginal people, they have a strong attachment to traditional lands and extended kinship systems, if ill or dying their one wish is to go home. Homelands give Aboriginal people a sense of belonging and allows them to contribute to their cultural responsibilities of caring for their country and managing the natural resources of their land. Extended families in the larger towns also frequently visit their homelands to spend restorative time there, reconnecting with their culture and traditional country, as is the case with Williams Well where the population in the community can go from 6 to 20 overnight on a weekend. This puts a huge strain on the permanent residents as they must provide accommodation and food.

The older members of the family are unable to live in these homes as they are unsuitable given their age, health and the lack of facilities suited to their needs. Dwellings having no disabled access. The bathroom facilities do not accommodate a wheelchair or railing to support an elderly person, access to the dwellings is via steps and the toilet block has no paths leading to it from the dwellings. The dwellings are open to the environment, which means that when it rains or there is a dust storm, there is no barriers to prevent rain or dust entering the house.

The shower block does have solar panels however during winter they the water does not warm up until after lunch and on some days not at all.

The homes are powered by a diesel generator, the community run the generator for short periods every day to keep fridges and freezers cold. The diesel is paid for by each member at times when money is short, they must limit the use of the generator and therefore have no power.

One of the residents spoke about the dust causing huge impacts to her health, given she suffers from Asthma. She is constantly dealing with chest infections. Access to health services is difficult as they live so far away and must rely on transport which is not always available. Car maintenance is also a problem as they do not have the money to get cars fixed. Driving on dirt roads in all sorts of conditions.

The residents expressed concern over the lack of inside toilets as they must walk across open rocky ground day or night to use the toilet or shower. This raised concern about snakes being able to enter the dwelling, so they are constantly having to check around the building. This is not an unfounded fear as they have had snakes in the past. They spoke about not having their grandchildren stay for more than a day due to the issues identified above. Women with small children cannot live on country, for all the reasons stated above.

These communities have numerous issues that do not just include physical barriers, and failures in 'health hardware' in the home. This refers to the essential aspects of a home required to maintain adequate personal health, such as functioning bathroom, kitchen and laundry facilities.

It has been proven that Aboriginal health is linked to housing (McDonald 2009). Research has identified that unless housing and communities are suitable for social, cultural and special needs, and be adaptable for various life stages the health of Aboriginal people will not improve.

The term 'appropriate housing' encapsulates the following: legal security of tenure; location; availability of support services; facilities and infrastructure; affordability; habitability; accessibility; and suitability (including housing quality, design, materials and cultural adequacy) (Grant, et al, 2017).



Figure 2: Map of Williams Well, Northern Territory

Community 2: Black Tank

The women felt it was important to stay on their land because of their families have lived on since creation. Though, they do not have the adequate facilities and water, they use their traditional knowledge and resilient to survive, this includes traditional medicine and their dreaming to help them face the challenges.

There are seven houses altogether on Black Tank which belong to them and build on their land, each house has no full service of electricity, clean running water. There are housing issues, for example the air conditioning ,they have been waiting for it to be fixed. This was reported in 2008, another house has a generation with no working system for an air condition, they have been waiting since 2015 for this to be fixed.

Black Tank have to start their power generator around 11am, they can only use the fridge and washing machine, though they have solar it does not provide the full electricity supply. They generally have to use one appliance at a time. This affects their health, for example; one of the women has been diagnosed with lupus since 1988 and she has also had a triple bypass in 2012, as well as having a chronic condition which affects her health.

Black Tank is in a drought area, their water tank is only half full, and they have bore water, which is salty. The bore water is used for showers and gardening and the tank water is used for drinking water, they will eventually have to start buying litres of water in Alice Springs. This can amount to a large cost to them, because to use their generators they have to go into Alice Spring and buy diesel fuel. They also have no

waste service, so they have to bury it on the land. When they are out of water, they have to buy plastic bottles of water, this is not good for the environment.

To the women, men and children these are challenging situations, because they have had no support from the Government or others. To overcome these challenges and to generate some extra income and employment for themselves and family, they decided to share their land and history with the rest of the world. The women have started their own health camp, by doing this they designed a community plan, by having retreats on the land and using their knowledge of healing, bush medicine and dreaming stories as well as knowing their role as stewards to the earth and the importance, they now have information session at Black Tank.

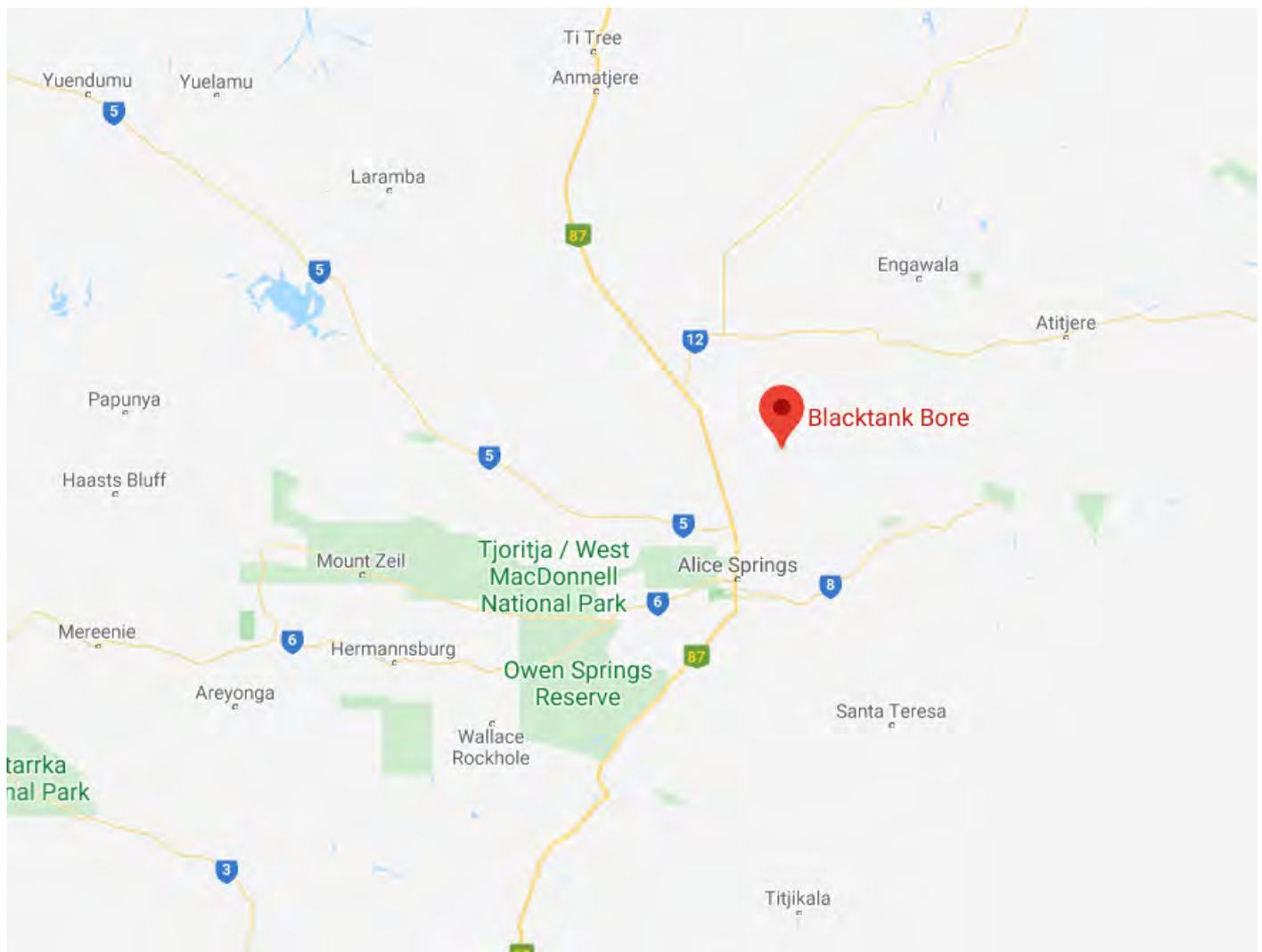


Figure 3: Map of Black Tank, Northern Territory

Conclusions

The health status of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities has always been a long-standing challenge in Australia, though there are improvements in some areas, overall in remote areas, such as the outstations, progress is slow.

The issues faced in Williams Well and Black Tank, with poor housing conditions and lack of clean running water, lack of electricity, leads to poor health which includes mental and spiritual health.

Historical trauma and colonisation continue to oppress the Aboriginal peoples of these two outstations, leaving them in despair. Their value of their land, culture, traditional knowledge is what makes them all stand strong in resilience, which has emerged in the stories from Black Tank and Williams Well.

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