

**ALICE SPRINGS 783 MANDY TAYLOR 9.10AM**  
**7<sup>TH</sup> MARCH, 2002.**

*DISCUSSION ON A RECENT URANIUM SPILL FROM THE RANGER MINE.*

*INTERVIEWS WITH DAVID VADIVELLO, FILMMAKER; NT MINISTER FOR BUSINESS, INDUSTRY & RESOURCE DEVELOPMENT PAUL HENDERSON; JUSTIN O'BRIEN, GUNDJEHMI ABORIGINAL CORPORATION; NORTHERN TERRITORY SENATOR TRISH CROSSIN.*

---

MANDY TAYLOR – PRESENTER:

Well, Ranger mine operators ERA have apologised to Mirrar traditional owners for a delay in telling them about a uranium spill from the mine. Yesterday the Gundjehmi corporation which represents traditional owners revealed high uranium levels in water had been found at four checkpoints around the mine, but ERA failed to reveal the spill immediately as it is required to do under regulations.

The territory government's defended the mine operators and we'll be speaking to the Gundjehmi corporation about that in a moment.

But the issue of the spill again highlights the situation facing traditional owners who live in close proximity to a uranium mine. A film by David Vadiveloo, *Trespass*, examines just this. David Vadiveloo, thanks for joining us.

DAVID VADIVELOO – FILMMAKER:

Thanks for having me, Mandy.

TAYLOR:

Why did you make this film?

VADIVELOO:

Well, the film was made as part of a series that's produced by CAAMA television, which is called *Nganampa Vanilico* (ph.sp.), and that's a ... basically it's the only Aboriginal language and culture program that's produced and broadcast for Aboriginal people. The film was made to record the fact that in the Mirrar community there are only twenty-four people remaining now who speak the Gundjehmi language, and Yvonne Margarula is the senior traditional elder of those people, is the one leading a fight to try and maintain their cultural and language sustenance at the moment.

TAYLOR:

And how does that fight to maintain language and culture, how is that impacted on by the presence of a uranium mine?

VADIVELOO:

Our interviews with Yvonne were quite interesting. It's, as far as we understand it, the first time she'd done a long form interview in language, and it was quite clear when we were talking to her that she's incredibly worried about the loss of language, the loss of culture. It impacts upon the children's ability to go into various areas of country; it impacts upon the community's ability to exercise their rights over their country, and therefore I think it limits probably their employment opportunities, but really just their general sense of cultural heritage and ownership of their own heritage.

TAYLOR:

It was interesting watching your program, you got a real sense from what Yvonne Margarula was saying that she does have a great concern for the future and what the children are learning, and how they're maintaining that connection to the land.

VADIVELLOO:

Yeah, I think ... I mean, Yvonne I think was quiet during a lot of the early part of this ... of the Jabiluka campaign when they had spokespeople such as Jacqui Katona speaking for the community, and I think that was obviously done with the approval of the community. Now I think she's finding an opportunity to speak out and say that the concern is not just with the present but with the future. When we were there one of the most extraordinary things were just the number of young children that we saw who were racing around and really seemingly oblivious to the fact that they're living in the

midst of a uranium mine, and that is her prime concern. It just comes out again and again in the film that her concern is what her children will inherit.

TAYLOR:

The film does show kids swimming, fishing, drinking in water. Where actually was that footage shot? Is it close to the mine?

VADIVELOO:

Yeah well, that water is actually the water that was subject, I think, to some of the conversations and concerns regarding this current spill, and that's the Magela Creek. And so that was obviously of great interest to me when I saw that footage coming through in that story. We shot most of that material on the Magela Creek. The kids were using that water hole regularly, yeah, as you say, swimming, fishing and obviously drinking the water. So it runs right by the community, the Mudginbardee (ph.sp.) community which is where the children all grow up, yeah.

TAYLOR:

You also show Ja-Ja Billabong.

VADIVELOO:

Yeah.

TAYLOR:

Where is that and what's there?

VADIVELOO:

Ja-Ja Billabong is actually on the mine lease so that is the original, as I understand it again, the uranium core sample storage facility, and during the film Yvonne speaks again at length about the fact that in the old days that's where ... well, when I say the old days, when she was a young person, that's where she would go with her family, they'd go fishing and hunting and in fact a lot of Aboriginal people would meet there for traditional ceremonies, and this is one of the things that she laments in the film, that the presence of the mine has forced the community off their traditional ceremonial grounds, and a lot of those friendship ceremonies, as she called them, have had to be stopped or moved.

TAYLOR:

So it's impacted on traditional life, but what about a sense of any potential danger. Is that there?

VADIVELOO:

Yeah, I mean, when you talk about the water that runs through the community, I ... you know, I can only recount a story that one of the community members told me which was the kids were playing in the water and I said, is this water safe? And this community member said, well look, we're not sure. We are told by the mining company that it's safe, and that's all well and good, but she said, it's interesting, as far as they know no one in the mine will use that water source. And so there is a concern about the danger for the kids and

certainly in Yvonne's conversations with us she's very mindful of what impact the mine and the uran... possibly uranium kind of spillage could have on the children, yeah.

TAYLOR:

So the kids swim in it, play in it, drink it, but no one from the mine will do so?

VADIVELOO:

Well, we certainly didn't see any mine people (laughs) taking off their shoes and socks and leaping in.

TAYLOR:

Doing a Barry Coulter and having a drink?

VADIVELOO:

Yeah (laughs), no, I didn't see anyone doing that.

TAYLOR:

What did Yvonne Margarula say to you about the continuing battle? Because of course a couple of years ago it was very intense about Jabiluka.

VADIVELOO:

Mmm.

TAYLOR:

Jabiluk... you, I guess, bluntly, you could say they lost that fight. Jabiluka is suspended but on purely economical

grounds, not on legal or environmental grounds. And of course Ranger still exists. I imagine it has been a very tough battle for Yvonne Margarula, and is she up to continuing it?

VADIVELOO:

Well yeah, I think it's been extremely tough for her, but I think it's testament to the woman that she still has the most extraordinary resistance and resilience when it comes to the battle. I mean, she's managed so far to resist successive federal governments and a number of multinational mining companies and still keep them at bay in terms of Jabiluka. I don't know necessarily that ... my understanding again is not that it was just economic. I understand that the community is actually causing Jab... one of the reasons that Jabiluka's not going ahead is the community's fight is being successful.

I think ... what she says about it is what she says at the end of the film. She said, they are strong or she says, we are strong. We will never stop. We will not stop until they stop and we will all be well again. And I think that goes to the question about whether she feels that it's safe or not safe. She thinks there's concerns about the health of the kids, yeah.

TAYLOR:

Thanks very much for joining us.

VADIVELOO:

Thank you.

TAYLOR:

Film maker David Vadiveloo and his film, Trespass. It looks at the life of the Mirrar and their relationship with ... well, basically life living next to a uranium mine. Has already won a judge's commendation from the Flickerfest and it's also been picked up for the REAL: life on film festival. So if you didn't manage to catch it on Imparja earlier this year, I'm sure you'll get another chance to look at it.

Now, yesterday the Territory government came out in support of ERA with resources minister Paul Henderson saying the spill was no threat to Kakadu and he had no concerns about the delay in informing stakeholders.

PAUL HENDERSON – NT RESOURCE DEVELOPMENT MINISTER:

The bottom line ... and I am a little bit disappointed at the Gundjehmi corporation. I have met with them and I have given them my absolute commitment that if they have any concerns in regards to the environment downstream from the mine to raise them with my office and I would get independent verification of their concerns. Now, they haven't raised those with me. They've run off straight to the media. And I think that that is irresponsible.

Kakadu is a major tourist attraction for the Northern Territory, and to run off ... and there are stories in the national media today saying that Kakadu is under threat is blatantly false and misleading. And let's get some maturity back into this debate. Let's analyse the science and the bottom line is is

that Kakadu is not under threat and there is no threat to the environment.

TAYLOR:

Resources minister Paul Henderson speaking out in defence of ERA yesterday.

Justin O'Brien from the Gundjehmi corporation joins us. Good morning, Justin.

JUSTIN O'BRIEN - GUNDJEHMI ABORIGINAL CORPORATION:

Good morning, Mandy.

TAYLOR:

Why didn't you take your concerns to the minister in the first instance?

O'BRIEN:

There were a series of discussions last week involving our legal representatives, the Northern Land Council who are a party to these various scientific committees in the region. They rightfully relayed on what information they knew. They had been discussing this with the Northern Territory department of business and industry and resource development. The minister's offer for an independent inquiry is welcomed of course, but that should not preclude the right of the traditional owners of this part of Kakadu to express their concerns at what is an error in operations and in reporting by the company.

TAYLOR:

Mr Henderson was quite strong in his defence of ERA and in his criticisms of Gundjehmi. Did this surprise you?

O'BRIEN:

It surprised us a great deal, yes. Particularly so because you have on one hand ERA apologising to traditional owners on the national television news saying they were tardy in apologising for tardiness. And then you have the Northern Territory minister virulently defending them saying there is no problem, I have no problem with their behaviour to date. He has ...

TAYLOR:

But did you expect a different response from a Territory Labor government?

O'BRIEN:

We did. He ... to be frank, he has the wrong target here. There should be ... it should be remembered that the Mirrar ... as I said earlier, they have a right ... a fundamental right to speak out when they feel that they have not been included properly in the information flow of what happens on their country.

TAYLOR:

You couldn't say that the Terr... Territory Labor has never not supported Ranger uranium mine though have they?

O'BRIEN:

The ... it's all ... it's been an ambiguous stance. I understand now that the position of the Northern Territory government is in line with the position of the federal ALP. So that's heartening.

TAYLOR:

ERA has apologised, said it won't happen again. Has that allayed your concerns?

O'BRIEN:

Absolutely not. An apology, whilst it's appreciated, of course, you know, it's an acknowledgment that they did make some serious blunders, it's the first step. We are calling for a comprehensive and detailed inquiry, as are others, but unlike the minister, we believe that none of the existing stakeholders should conduct this inquiry. We think that a truly independent inquiry should be done, and that this perhaps should be done by the environment committee of the federal Senate. This is because all the key stakeholders who would produce such a report at this point have patently failed in their responsibilities to protect Kakadu.

At the moment, we have a situation where the supervising scientist is saying, ERA will prepare a report, we will consider their report next week. Once again we have the OSS ticking off something the company produces on itself after its been caught out. This is not good process.

TAYLOR:

---

Thanks for your time this morning.

O'BRIEN:

Okay.

TAYLOR:

Justin O'Brien from the Gunjehmi corporation, disappointed with the territory governments defensive ERA after a uranium spill. The federal Labor Opposition says the federal government has failed to ensure environmental protection and transparency at Ranger. And territory Labor Senator Trish Crossin joins me. Good morning.

TRISH CROSSIN – SENATOR FOR NT:

Morning Mandy.

TAYLOR:

Well, Trish Crossin you say you're disappointed with the federal government's response to this and Minister David Kemp hasn't been returning phone calls to talk about the issue. But what about the territory government's defence of ERA, are you disappointed in Paul Henderson?

CROSSIN:

Well, I think you have to separate two issues here: Northern Territory government are responsible through Department of Mines and Energy for actually monitoring, you know, uranium levels and possible damage there to the environment. And I'm sure Paul will seek some report in that instance.

What I'm referring to though is the role of the Officer of the Supervising Scientist and the fact that once again the company has taken a very long period of time to report this incident publicly and to let stakeholders know about it.

TAYLOR:

Well, Paul Henderson says no problems in that delay.

CROSSIN:

And that's (indistinct) at stake here.

TAYLOR:

Paul Henderson said that's no problem, the delay; it's no worries, there's no threats. Are you disappointed with him?

CROSSIN:

Well, it's not the issue of the threat, it's the issue of the delay and that is that this company as a result of a report that was conducted by the Office of the Supervising Scientist two years ago had to in fact train employees to ensure that all employees appreciated the need to let stakeholders know as soon as possible any event. Not just events that might have major consequences but any event.

Now, if in fact this happened early January, it's now taken until the end of February, again we have another six week delay in the reporting requirement. My understanding is that

that is not acceptable to the Commonwealth so what are they doing about it?

TAYLOR:

Should it be acceptable to the Northern Territory government, that delay?

CROSSIN:

Well, the issue here is that this is the Commonwealth government's responsibility.

TAYLOR:

But the NT government also has a role to play. They say ... or Paul Henderson says he's not unduly concerned about the delay. You're sounding like you're saying, he should be concerned.

CROSSIN:

What I'm saying is it's the responsibility of the Office of the Supervising Scientist. They've already done a report into a delay that occurred between December '99 and April 2000. Senator Hill who was the minister at the time during an Estimates process also said that that delay was not acceptable. One would assume that the Commonwealth government does not believe that this delay is acceptable either. And some questions need to be asked about why it keeps recurring.

This seems to be a recurring trend by this company and in fact they have come out and said they have erred. And so therefore, what processes are now in place - absolutely watertight in place - to ensure that a delay in reporting and notifying stakeholders about any problems doesn't happen again in the future?

TAYLOR:

Trish Crossin, would anything be different under any federal Labor government? After all, under federal Labor's policy Ranger would stay.

CROSSIN:

We made ... back in '99 when we did an inquiry into what was happening at Jabiluka - which spilled over of course looking at what was happening in Ranger - we made a number of recommendations about tightening the reporting requirements which the Commonwealth government may well have responded to that report but it doesn't seem as though they have put those recommendations into place.

Similarly with the report that was done in April 2000, questions I'll now be asking of Minister Kemp is whether or not those recommendations have been put in place, and if they have then one would assume that the problems that have occurred now would suggest that those recommendations are not working and the situation needs to be further looked at.

TAYLOR:

And Senator Justin O'Brien from Gunjehmi said that Mirrar would like to see the senate environment committee investigate this. Is that something you'd support?

CROSSIN:

Ah, it may well be, I mean if we ... I think first of all we need to actually be asking the Commonwealth some questions about whether the recommendations have being put in place and if they have whether or not they are effective and what role the company is playing in making sure this doesn't happen again.

I think the senate's role would be that if they're not satisfied with the questions they get ... with the answers – sorry – that they get to those questions, then there would be a need for the senate to look at this further. But I think we need to go through a series of asking questions, getting responses and finding out exactly what happened this time and why. Why is there another repeat of the April 2000 incident before we go setting up another inquiry.

TAYLOR:

Senator Crossin thanks for joining us.

CROSSIN:

Thanks Mandy.

TAYLOR:

Territory Labor Senator Trish Crossin.

END OF SEGMENT