

Address to the PHAA Conference

29th September 1999
Carlton Hotel, Darwin

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*Gundjehmi Aboriginal Corporation
Executive Officer, Jacqui Katona*

I'd like to thank the conference organisers for the opportunity to participate here today. For those of you not aware, I work for the Mirrar people, the traditional owners currently opposing the development of the Jabiluka mine - the proponent in this case is Energy Resources of Australia. This brief presentation is given in the interest of constructive debate - we believe the story of the Mirrar people has much to offer. In fact, twenty years of hindsight has made the Mirrar experts in development - experts in how not to proceed with development.

If you have not been to our country, you would have only an image in your mind of what the country looks and feels like. Maybe this image would contain bright sunlight, birds and animals, paperbark swamps with flowers that smell like a baked potato. Marrawutii, the sea eagle, swooping low over Mohla billabong. Cool green grasses on hot days, glorious fires where embers burn low in cool night temperatures. Maybe you can imagine what its like to see tens of thousands of magpie geese feeding on lush floodplains.

Kakadu for our mob is our blood and our family.

These lands give to us our identity, our history, and our future. We are obligated to take care of this country not only because of what the country provides for us, but because our law requires it. It had been a sustainable economy for thousands of years.

The imposition of uranium mining on the Aboriginal community in Kakadu irretreivably hastened the poor social and economic conditions which were brought with colonisation. The imposition of uranium mining in our community has left an indelible message - that Aboriginal people are expendable.

Against the backdrop of national controversy about legislating land rights for Aboriginal communities in the Northern Territory the mining industry and Governments were well aware of the potential for social destabilisation in the Aboriginal community as a result of uranium mining at Ranger. In the late 1970's the Fox Report commissioned by the Federal government reported on the poor social and economic conditions of the Aboriginal people of Kakadu at the time. It said:

"personal incomes depend ... largely on social service payments such as age pensions and family allowance payment, contributions from relatives who are earning wages and the sale of artefacts..."

This is still the case.

It is also said:

"Excessive consumption of alcohol by a large proportion of the Aboriginal people in the

Region will have a deleterious effect on their general welfare; their future will depend in a large part on removing or substantially reducing the causes of this problem."

These causes have never been identified. Alcohol is still an inescapable problem.

The Fox report recognised that:

"the Aboriginal people of the Region are a depressed group whose standards of living are far below those acceptable to the wider Australian society. They are a community whose lives have been and are still being, disrupted by the intrusions of an alien people. They feel the pressures of the white man's activities in relation to their land. In the face of mining exploration, and the threat of much further development, they feel helpless and lost."

This continues to be the case. We believe that since the Fox Inquiry reported a continuing cycle of cultural genocide has taken place.

This conference is for health professionals and the North Kakadu region provides some important signposts for dealing with fundamental issues affecting Aboriginal health.

I can't quote health statistics here for you today specific to our community because the baseline data doesn't exist. There is no quantifiable picture of an Aboriginal community living next door to a uranium mine.

Nevertheless there is nothing startling, nor particularly useful, in hearing for the millionth time that Aboriginal people have a life expectancy 20 years lower than the average Australian. There is nothing new or insightful in rehashing the evidence that social policy in relation to Aboriginal communities has failed.

What we think the history of North Kakadu offers is a fundamental insight into identifying the causes of systemic poor health. The most obvious causes to us are the barriers created by non-Aboriginal society to us controlling our future.

I also believe that there has been a fundamental failure to recognise that we live in a deeply traumatised society. While everyone is rightly predicting the effects of mass slaughter lasting for generations in East Timor - many people seem to have forgotten that around 95% of the population in the North Kakadu region have been decimated in the last hundred years. The effects go largely ignored. The only remedy offered by both mining companies and governments is the self-interested proposal to mine uranium.

While the health conditions treated in our clinic may be related to poor environmental health, poor primary health care or as other symptoms of broader problems of the community. You can be guaranteed also that the jurisdictional and political issues intensify and aggravate the poor health conditions of our community.

Just some of the pressures on Aboriginal people in North Kakadu include overwhelming numbers of meetings to deliberate requests and ideas which are created by the non-Aboriginal agenda. This disempowerment of Aboriginal people by relentless and meaningless meetings seems to be an untouched area of health policy.

Our experience is that health practitioners cannot exclude themselves or the operation of a

clinic from the political and jurisdictional realities of the patients they are treating.

Health professionals must facilitate Aboriginal people acting as decision-makers in the clinic in all aspects of management. They must avoid cross cultural exercises which benefit only white people.

When Aboriginal people have questioned the mining company releasing contaminated water into the wetland where we hunt and fish our peoples concerns were treated as child-like and naive. There is not one organisation which can reconcile the cultural knowledge amassed in our society with the scientific justifications to achieve commercial objectives. Our people hold great fears about the health of future generations.

The broad lessons in our area in relation to reversing inevitable trends in poor health must also be drawn from the activities of the mining company. In Jabiru the conspiracy of silence has given approval to the tactics of the mining company. It is the responsibility of each and every member of any community to make their views known because we all now have to live with the consequences.

Health professionals cannot assume that short term funding sources, such as mining revenue, can substitute for resources managed and controlled by Aboriginal people.

Health professionals must also stop re-inventing the wheel. North Kakadu has seen a constant stream of non-Aboriginal people who come into the region for 12 months or two years and who rarely appear to have read the mass of previous reports. It is maddening when they then complain about Aboriginal people being uninspired about their grand ideas for solving the region's health problems. You see, we've heard it all before.

Traditional owners now find themselves in the invidious position where they are unable to ensure the company's compliance with requirements under mining agreements. It is the case that the rights available to the Mirrar people under the Land Rights Act have been eroded through the negotiation of mining agreements. We believe that it is the actions of governments and the mining company which have brought about a continuing relentless trend in poor health in our community.

Land rights was supposed to be the protection for our people to rebuild our communities. In North Kakadu land rights never arrived. Instead our people's lives have been dominated by a company with financial imperatives and little regard for the future of the Aboriginal community.

The Land Rights Act held up as the high watermark of rights to land provides a good example. It is in the exercise of our rights and our obligations which provides for the long term improvements in health for our communities. We are yet to fully enjoy these rights

I give three example of the fundamental failure of the system to protect the rights of Aboriginal people. Failures which we believe are directly related to the ongoing health conditions:

1. Mining companies should never proceed without informed Aboriginal consent.

There is a problem when no doesn't mean no - there is a violation at the most basic level. It might take place because of "legal reasons" it might take place in the "national interest" - but

it will always be a violation. To add to that violation there is the continuing most basic abuse of ignoring the consequences of that violation. Just rewriting history - calling it something else - like "negative social impacts" is an exercise in gross deception. We have been told over and over that the removal of our right to say no to Ranger is an unpleasantness best forgotten - that the future is all-important. The reality for our community is that the problems suffered by our people in the past are what we must take responsibility for now. How can you expect Aboriginal people to put the interests of a private company before the interests of their children and grandchildren? A dramatic change is required in the terms on which Aboriginal people are expected to negotiate mining. There is a demand being made on government and industry - a demand that Aboriginal people in Kakadu be assisted to manage and control their own affairs - a demand which is consistently ignored.

2. Mining projects should facilitate economic and political independence - not just transfer welfare provision and political control from the white public sector to the white private sector

I could direct you to the eloquent findings of the Social Impact Study completed in the early eighties which simply documented the absolute inaction of government to assist our community to deal with the effects of a series of major industrial developments. The most recent Social Impact Study completed in 1997 simply recommended an increase in welfare programs - turning up a kind of a drip feed - failing to recognise the most fundamental traditional owner rights - choosing instead to refer to them as "stakeholders" - again denying them the opportunity to control the future of our community.

ERA's answer to the social problems created by the present regime is for traditional owners to say yes to Jabiluka - all problems would be solved - the money would be there to right the wrongs of the past. For the Mirrar it's the same as taking a gunshot wound to the chest - just leave it open - and increase the amount of blood through the drip. This is not an acceptable solution. The wounds must be allowed to heal.

Studies, reports, enquiries, assessments - these processes have become an end in themselves - touted as the solution, conveniently crafted and promoted as justification to further abuse our rights and entrench the dominance of government and industry and all for the improved viability of a privately-owned company.

3. There requires a recognition that mining projects have irreversible impacts - impacts which destroy aspects of culture forever.

Mining projects need to have a finite lifespan based not on a when minerals are exhausted but at a stage before traditional owners are exhausted - there is a point when a community can take no more.

Jabiluka cannot go ahead for this reason. One enormous uranium mine combined with little concern for social impacts over twenty years is surely enough in anyone's language. There is a point at which the development of the community by the community at the community's own pace must take priority.

The great Kakadu experiment in "independence" Gagudju - the dangers of combining business and social service delivery - when business goes bad the first thing to cut are the services.

We do not need obscenely large amounts of money to be spent on myopic strategies to investigate and examine the extent of our poor conditions, we need the recognition extended to our people that it is only Aboriginal people who can resolve the problems experienced in our community. We don't need another regime of so-called solutions to be imposed on our people. Our right to manage our own services must be supported not only with words but with action and resources. Any thing else is only a band aid solution.

