

Economic development in Aboriginal communities

Site visit report

Guyra and Tamworth



Site visit to Guyra/Tamworth – Wednesday and Thursday, 27-28 April 2016

On Wednesday 27 April 2016 committee members undertook a site visit to:

- The Wattleridge Indigenous Protected Area (Banbai Enterprises)

On Thursday 28 April 2016 committee members undertook a site visit to:

- The Whitehaven Coal Mine at Maules Creek.

Wattleridge Indigenous Protected Area – Banbai Enterprise

Banbai Enterprise Development Aboriginal Corporation is an organisation that supports the economic and social development of Banbai people on their own land. Wattleridge Indigenous Protected Area (IPA) is a 600ha property purchased in 1998 by the Indigenous Land Corporation for Banbai Land Enterprises, who manage the land. It was declared an IPA in 2001.¹ The aim is to make the Wattleridge IPA self-sufficient and able to provide opportunities for the Traditional Owners.²

The committee met with Ms Tanya Elone, Manager of Banbai Enterprise Development Aboriginal Corporation. Also in attendance were:

- Mr Tremane Patterson (Head Supervisor)
- Mr Cody Patterson (Head Supervisor)
- Mr Dominic Cutmore (Ranger)
- Mr Clive Ahoy (Chairperson of BEDAC)
- Ms Bridgett Ahoy (Assisting Manager)

The Wattleridge site, which borders a national park, is used for various economic and social development purposes. It hosts a learning centre and provides development of Aboriginal people through various programs including as rangers and other staff to support land management, eco-tourism and agistment. About 20 per cent of the IPA is cleared land.³

Banbai partner with various organisations to support the work they do, including the Rural Fire Service (RFS) and Firesticks, which is an Indigenous led network that aims to re-invigorate the use of cultural burning by facilitating cultural learning pathways to fire and land management as a way to assist non-Indigenous and Indigenous people to look after country, share their experiences and collectively explore ways to achieve their goals.⁴

¹ Australian Government, Department of the Environment 'Wattleridge Indigenous Protected Area', <https://www.environment.gov.au/indigenous/ipa/declared/wattleridge.html>, accessed 2 May 2016

² Submission 34, Banbai Enterprise Development Aboriginal Corporation, p 1.

³ Ms Tanya Elone, Manager, Banbai Enterprise Development Aboriginal Corporation, 27 April 2016.

⁴ Firesticks – Cultural Burning: healthy communities, healthy landscapes <http://www.firesticks.org.au/about/>

‘[The] majority of our rangers are all trained in BFF [bush fire fighting]... we take control of the burn. We get RFS to come in and do the measurement of fuel loads and to supervise, but we take control of the fires... we bring the cultural aspect and that’s what firesticks is about – is helping us develop that cultural side of burning.’ Ms Tanya Elones.

Wattleridge is home to various rare and endangered species, and part of Banbai’s role in land management is managing feral animals on the property including wild pigs, deer, foxes and Gambusia (fish).

There is the potential for Banbai to support other groups managing IPAs:

‘There’s 5 IPAs in this area... because we’ve been going since 2001, and their only sort of recent – 5 years, they don’t know a lot about fencing, and they don’t have enough people to get TAFE to come in to teach... so that’s another opportunity, [for us] to go into other Aboriginal organisations who run similar programs to get a fee for service as well [in areas like feral animal management and fencing]... so there’s opportunities there it’s just tapping into them at the right time’ Ms Tanya Elones.

Mr Tremane Patterson told the committee that the best thing about being out on Wattleridge was ‘being connected to the country.’

Mr Tremane Patterson went on to say they bring children of all ages, from pre-schoolers to high schoolers to the site:

‘I reckon a lot of younger fellas have lost their connection and it’s good to get schools out here, they’re starting to ... learn a bit more about it and just to see them wanting more to come out and ... that’s really good for me to see. Not only Aboriginal people but non-indigenous people too, you know what kid don’t like the bush!’

The key points and issues raised during the visit to Wattleridge IPA were:

- The importance of being able to sustain the property without reliance on funding (which they are currently receiving from Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet up to 2018)
- Banbai has increased its workforce from 3 staff up to 15 staff and continues to grow and is also focussing on a succession plan model of teaching younger members the skills to undertake the manager and head ranger positions.
- It is currently working on a development plan with an external consultant to support the organisations growth and to maximise opportunities.

Whitehaven Coal – Maules Creek Mine

Whitehaven Coal is on the path to becoming Australia's largest independent coal producer, producing 23 million tonnes of coal per annum, with 20 million this year. They operate the Maules Creek coal mine, which is located in the Gunnedah basin. Whitehaven is the dominant player in the only emerging high quality coal basin in Australia, supplying high energy, low ash, low sulphur coal to premium Asian markets.⁵

The committee visited Whitehaven Coal Mine at Maules Creek and spoke with the following people:

- Mr Peter Wilkinson, General Manager, Operations
- Mr Tim Muldoon, Group Manager Community Relations and Property
- Mr Matt Sparks, Operations Manager
- Mr Steve Burgess, Senior Trainer
- Mr Bob Sutherland, Aboriginal Community Relations Officer
- Mr Darren Trindall, Plant Operator

The mine employs about 360 FTE staff, plus additional contractors. The mine will provide employment for at least 30 years.⁶

The employment of a dedicated Aboriginal Community Relations Officer early has 'certainly assisted in bridging the communication [gap] with the local community and getting people interested in the mine and bringing them on.' – Mr Peter Wilkinson

Whitehaven set the project at Maules Creek a target of 10 per cent Aboriginal employment which they hit from 'about day one' – Mr Peter Wilkinson. Currently about 12-15 per cent of the Maule's Creek mine workforce is Aboriginal.

Whitehaven have implemented a Reconciliation Action Plan which focuses on a range of things to support local Aboriginal communities and focuses on 'employment, education, training, health, cultural awareness and economic development and potential partnerships' – Mr Peter Wilkinson. The plan is driven by the corporate team, management team and the site team, but all staff are responsible under it.⁷

What worked well for Whitehaven was having a good combination of some very experienced staff, and some employees who were completely new to the industry – backed by a very strong training team. This was backed with a 'long deliberate plan' to stagger the excavation work, which allowed them time to train up staff to develop a 'steady build-up of personnel' and that worked 'very well' – Mr Peter Wilkinson.

There is a supported apprenticeship program, four per year in a range of trades (mechanical, electrical) which further supports diversity in the workforce. The company has a commitment to one of those apprenticeships being indigenous – Mr Bob Sutherland.

⁵ Mr Peter Wilkinson, 28 April 2016.

⁶ Mr Peter Wilkinson, 28 April 2016.

⁷ Mr Peter Wilkinson, 28 April 2016.

The following key points or issues were highlighted during the meeting at Whitehaven:

- There are significant benefits to having a diverse workforce that represents local communities. In Whitehaven's case, this has included a strong representation of Aboriginal employees, and of female employees, from local towns including Gunnedah and Narrabri.
- Employing people from outside the area (further west) where they have not had strong connections to the area have been less successful at building a career at the mine: 'If their connections are elsewhere, whether its Aboriginal person or non-Aboriginal person, then they don't necessarily want to be here' – Mr Peter Wilkinson.
- There are some significant challenges that new employees need to work through, including time away from family, pressure from family when they go home (including expectations for money), managing income.
- Ensuring that people are treated the same, but with tailored and flexible supports, has led to less segregation in the workforce: '... some of the young ones come in and think "oh I wanna buy this new flash car!" and then thinking "oh I don't have to turn up to work, I'm Aboriginal"... they believe that they have "oh I'm so special I can get away with it." But we drum it into them that they're not, they're just like every other worker. We commit to you. We'll give you employment and support you, and you commit to us and turn up to work' – Mr Darren Trindall.
- 'That's what's great about Whitehaven. It's not about just showing a few Aboriginal faces on the staff - it's a really genuine program where opportunities are created for the Indigenous community but you still have to be qualified and have to earn the job' – Mr Peter Wilkinson.
- 'We talk to them [new staff] about what we expect from them and what the company expects from them. We're making this commitment to you to give you a full time job to provide a better life for yourself and your family' -Mr Darren Trindall.