

Economic development in Aboriginal communities

Site visit report

Eden and Narooma



Site visit to Eden/Narooma – Wednesday 25 May 2016

On Wednesday 25 May 2016 committee members undertook site visits to:

- The Bundian Way ‘Story Trail’ and Jigamy Farm, Eden/Broadwater;
- Wagonga Local Aboriginal Land Council, Narooma.

Bundian Way and Jigamy Farm – Eden/Broadwater

The Bundian Way is a 360km pathway that is possibly more than 40,000 years old, that was used by Aboriginal people to travel between the coast at Twofold Bay in Eden, and the Snowy Mountains. The local Aboriginal people later showed the path to European settlers, and parts of it later became first roads between the coast and the mountains.¹

In December 2012 it was entered on the NSW State Heritage Register, both for its Aboriginal and European and shared heritage values.²

The Bundian Way is a project of Eden Local Aboriginal Land Council, and ‘aims to oversee the heritage protected route and its use for educational/tourism purposes including better recognition of its cultural values. An overall aim is to create Aboriginal jobs.’³

The committee met with Mr Les Kosez, Acting CEO of the Eden Local Aboriginal Land Council and Chairperson of the Twofold Aboriginal Corporation. Also in attendance were:

- Mr Chris Bird, CEO, Twofold Aboriginal Corporation
- Mr Ben Cruse, Chairperson, Eden Local Aboriginal Land Council, Deputy Chair, Twofold Aboriginal Corporation
- Noel Whitem, Bundian Way Project Manager, Eden Local Aboriginal Land Council

The Bundian Way offers a great opportunity for the local Aboriginal community, but also the broader region. However, Eden LALC expressed concern that, without financial support, the existing work that has been done will be futile.

‘... I guess in some ways you could consider us a success but ... we still see it as we’re at the precipice of becoming a success. For us, if we can’t take the next step, basically it’ll be a failed exercise. We really need to take the next step in establishing our enterprise for us to consider it a success.’ Mr Les Kosez.

‘The Bundian Way is, at the moment and I can’t see any changes into the future, is the greatest opportunity the local Aboriginal people would have to overcome, help us overcome, social [and] economic problems, but also help us to be seen as being a contributor.’ Mr Ben Cruse.

¹ Mr Les Kosez, 25 May 2016.

² The Bundian Way Heritage, http://www.bundianway.com.au/bundian_way.htm, December 2012.

³ Eden Local Aboriginal Land Council, *The Bundian Way*, 14 December 2012, http://www.bundianway.com.au/Eden_Land_Ccl.htm

‘What we intend doing is to establish this pathway so it can serve as a number of things. One purpose would be to help Aboriginal people with a stronger connection back to our culture. It would be a means by which we can teach our children and allow them to enjoy and celebrate their cultural heritage. But it would also be available for mainstream school children so we can incorporate heritage studies into the schools... and then we’d have an ecotourism with an Aboriginal flavour, because I don’t believe that the tourism in this local district or anywhere in Australia would reach its full potential without Aboriginal culture ... as part of the tourism.’ Mr Ben Cruse.

‘The Aboriginal population in Eden has been growing fairly significantly in the last 10 to 15 years and the major employers in the past have been the primary industries, however that decreased rapidly and the current major employer in the Bega Valley is in the health sector, which obviously doesn’t offer a great deal of new opportunities for Aboriginal people to get into.’ Mr Les Kosez.

‘I think if we can establish this enterprise, it’s not only just cultural tourism that’ll provide employment opportunities; it will actually provide opportunities across a number of different sectors and also contribute to growth in other sectors by increasing visitation rates we’re actually contributing to the hotels and motels in town ... contributing to increased activity in different retailers in town ... we really ... believe that we are not only develop something that’ll be great for us as a community but also contribute to the regional community.’ Mr Les Kosez

‘A lot of people say to young people, you know ‘go into the cities and get a job’. Well I know three young girls went to Alice Springs and Darwin and had jobs in the tourism industry but they got lonely for their people so they come back home ...’ Mr Ben Cruse

The risk of the project failing (which is likely without a flexible funding injection to support) is significant and could have substantial impacts on the local community:

‘The problem we got to date is that, because we won’t be in a position unless we get an injection of funding, we won’t be in a position to actually run the tours when this pathway is open and what’ll happen is mainstream public, because they’ve got access to immediate dollars, they can come in and set up guided tour programs and that’s gonna have a reverse effect. If we think that all our sweat and all our stress and all our intellectual cultural property is being hijacked, maybe unintentionally, but being hijacked and someone else starts to reap the rewards from that... it’s gonna create envy and even lower self-esteem. So what we really need is funding to finish that pathway and to train our people to do maintenance ...’ Mr Ben Cruse.

‘We really need a minimum of three years assistance so that we can be in a position to establish an Aboriginal cultural tourism program ...’ Mr Ben Cruse.

‘There’s other interest from other commercial operators in the region... we’ve had anecdotal information that there are other groups both within the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal community that they want to step into that arena of Aboriginal cultural tourism ... we may actually find ourselves in a position where we’ve done a lot of the hard work in establishing infrastructure and not be in a position to capitalise on that an enter into the market competitively.’ Mr Les Kosez.

'[Our people] will be employed in different roles. They'll be employed in retail. They'll be employed in hospitality ... They'll be employed in maintenance ... so there'll be a number of different employment opportunities.' Mr Les Kosez.

'There is a market there, and a growth market there. And if we were to begin promoting ourselves I believe we could have an even greater market. Problem is ... that capital investment. It's the investment required in establishing that business, those capabilities and skills required to expedite the development of an enterprise'. Mr Les Kosez.

The Eden LALC has developed strong training programs, but has been unable to retain employees because of the insecurity of the jobs available.

'[Training] is something that the land council does well. So, our biggest problem is that we can't offer sustainable employment so what happens generally is that we invest a lot of time into Aboriginal community members and give them a wide range of experience and skills ... and we lose them to mainstream because they can provide sustainable employment... that's been one of our problems for a number of years now.' Mr Les Kosez.

There are serious issues with the inflexibility of funding provided to LALCs. Mr Kosez told the committee:

'... even with this latest commitment [of \$700,000] ... it's only for infrastructure and capital items, we're not allowed use any of it for wages. So the unfortunate reality of it is if we do it as requested we'll have a pile of fantastic materials and really flash toys, but nobody to do it.'

'... now we're in a position, we've got all this money - \$700,000 for infrastructure but our positions are unfunded. Which is awkward for us, because were not ungrateful for that money but we're just going 'well, that's nice but how we gonna spend that?' Mr Noel Whitem.

'It's like you can buy a lift, but you can't buy a contractor to put it in' Mr Ben Cruse.

'So the problem is, is we keep getting told, once it [funding request] gets up to that top level 'it doesn't fit with these guidelines and you can't do this, or this under these programs etc. etc.'. Well that's all well and good, can you tell us how you can assist us within those set of guidelines or in line with the program, instead of telling us what we can't do.' Mr Les Kosez.

The LALC are keen to move away from government assistance models, and to be self-sustainable.

'We know what our critical needs are. We know what our strengths are. Hopefully we can get the other stakeholders and powers at be to understand our position. Understand that what we're asking for is ... for their assistance to help us get away from asking from assistance.' Mr Les Kosez.

'It's not like we're expecting government to hold our hand forever. We believe that if we can get that assistance in those start up years – we want to get away from the grant merry-go-round, we want to be sustainable as an organisation – we want to be self-sustainable as a community...' Mr Les Kosez.

‘It’s not that government assistance is the only way that we’re looking. We’re looking at taking on the risk of some investment from banking institutions, or as I said earlier leveraging off some of the assets we have. All these things take time and expertise and money, which we don’t have.’ Mr Les Kosez.

‘To sell any land we have to have a current valuation done. It’s a bit of a process getting approval from our membership and also from NSWALC, and it is our intention to look at how ... the sale or disposal of a significant amount of land that we could use for reinvestment. However, if we aren’t able to secure some key management positions in the short to medium term, there’ll be nobody to do that work.’ Mr Les Kosez.

Wagonga Local Aboriginal Land Council

The Wagonga Local Aboriginal Land Council was incorporated in 1984 under the *Aboriginal Land Rights Act 1983*. The Wagonga Local Aboriginal Land Council provides housing and accommodation services for Aboriginal people and is an information and communication centre for Aboriginal people and the wider community.⁴

The committee visited Wagonga Local Aboriginal Land Council and spoke with the following people:

- Ronald J Mason, Board Member, Wagonga Local Aboriginal Land Council
- Victoria Moore, Community Member, Wagonga Local Aboriginal Land Council.

Mr Mason and Ms Moore were concerned about the lack of employment opportunities for Aboriginal people in the local area. Ms Moore noted the success of the Green Army at Wallaga Lake and suggested that a similar initiative would be beneficial in Narooma. Mr Mason discussed the possibility of developing an Indigenous-owned aquaculture venture.

There was also a discussion about the challenges of Aboriginal housing including rental management, overcrowding and homelessness.

Unlike other local Aboriginal land councils, Wagonga is not considering a cultural tourism venture to enhance economic development.

⁴ Official Narooma website, Wagonga LALC, <http://www.narooma.org.au/wagonga-l-a-l-c/>.