

RAC Sub 3

**From:** [redacted]  
**To:** <laehsc@parliament.wa.gov.au>  
**Date:** 21/05/2007 5:42:40 pm  
**Subject:** Submission -- Discussion Paper on Remote Aboriginal Communities (Report No. 6)

Dear Ms Purdy,

Please find attached my submission. Please feel free to use it in whatever way you believe appropriate to the aims of the Committee.

Sincerely,

Rasjad Moore

[redacted]

Principal Research Officer  
Education and Health Standing Committee  
Legislative Assembly  
Parliament House  
PERTH WA 6000

Dear Dr Purdy,

**Submission on discussion paper “Inquiry into Successful  
Initiatives in Remote Aboriginal Communities”**

Following up on my telephone conversation regarding the above discussion paper, I wish to make the following submission.

I believe the report does not reflect the original purpose of the inquiry – i.e. to report on successful initiatives in remote Aboriginal communities.

In fact, it appears that the report itself has radically changed the Committee’s objectives to fit an overly long, unnecessarily complicated and somewhat murkily written “history” of Aboriginal affairs in Western Australia.

Is this really important to the Committee’s terms of reference?

I believe the ‘historical’ background could be summarized and reduced to a few pages. If the purpose of this paper is to report and make recommendations on successful initiatives

in remote Aboriginal communities it would seem vital to identify these initiatives.

Except for housing – which I feel is over emphasized in the paper – you have overlooked or ignored the following major areas of progress (or initiatives) in remote Aboriginal communities:

**Health.** For years this has been of highest priority for remote communities. Among the many initiatives is training and support of Aboriginal health workers; building of bush clinics; improved access by air and road to communities with health issues; highly successful programs to address eyesight problems and diabetes; improved birthing and infant health; and programs to address substance abuse and malnutrition.

**Infrastructure/Services.** As pointed out in the paper, ‘remoteness’ seems to be a relative thing. Yet many unreported successful initiatives have focused not only on ways to technologically tame this ‘tyranny of distance’ but also to preserve the isolation - the privacy - that is vital to Aboriginal culture and lifestyle. Among such initiatives are remarkable improvements in telephonic and internet communications, bringing remote communities themselves closer together and opening new windows to information and commerce. Modern, reliable electrical power has come to many remote communities and has given their people access to refrigeration (and thus to food important to health). Alternative forms of energy (e.g. solar, wind) are also being explored and applied. Other initiatives of great importance to health and amenity are sewage and drainage works and

related issues of rubbish disposal and sanitation. Indeed these are considered in the present draft but only in negative terms, omitting, for example, the role of WA's Governor General in supporting and personally becoming involved in such initiatives.

Local governments are now working with communities to extend roadworks into areas previously isolated owing to poor maintenance and engineering neglect.

Remote communities in eastern WA through joint efforts have actually established a corporate airline to ferry urgently needed medicines, supplies, mail as well as passengers (including school children and visiting family) to areas previously dependant on unreliable and expensive contractors. These same communities have also established a trucking company to transport the large volume of supplies. By taking advantage of the economies of scale, they have leased a warehouse to centralize procurement of groceries and supplies for transport to member communities. Where in this discussion paper are such landmark initiatives considered?

**Employment/Enterprise.** It should be noted that many of the successful initiatives suggested above have provided jobs and skills to Aboriginal workers in remote areas. In recent years more Indigenous workers have found jobs in the mining and pastoral industries. For example, remote communities in around Yalgoo are now benefiting from job opportunities in the booming Orica Mines. Employment in primary industry remains a mainstay of long established

remote communities, some of which manage their own enterprises. Consider, for example, the Indigenous sandalwood gatherers of Coanana/Cundalee. New opportunities are on the horizon for Indigenous workers in the Kimberley where the second stage of the promising Ord River Scheme has been successfully spearheaded by Indigenous community groups through a momentous land settlement. This could become a major Indigenous agricultural endeavour.

As noted briefly in the discussion paper. The Federal government has reigned in – if not destroyed -- the Community Development Employment Program. I believe the decision is exceedingly unwise. With all its shortcomings, bad press, and the Minister Hockey's uninformed pontifications, CDEP was an enlightened move to help give remote communities a sense of independence and participation in work programs at a local, grassroots level. I urge the Committee to identify as examples of success communities that have benefited from CDEP. From my own experience as a community advisor, I have seen a traditional woodcarving effort at the Papulankutja (Blackstone) community progress from a few elders and women whittling outside their wiltjas to a \$10,000 enterprise, providing the community with much needed employment and respect. And this was only the beginning of a movement that has linked a number of Western Desert communities in successful joint endeavours.

**Tourism.** For many years tourism has been touted as a major source of employment and enterprise for Indigenous

communities. This discussion paper should, I believe, look into some of the more successful and enduring examples. While many are identified as Indigenous controlled, it should be noted too that few are managed and operated by Aboriginal persons. White, European entrepreneurs on contract to the communities provide the tourism 'expertise' while employing Indigenous workers in service positions. Operating costs are thus high, profits to communities owning these 'resorts' minimal. Yet initiatives they are, providing valuable experience to Indigenous persons that can be applied to establishing and managing tourist enterprises themselves.

A major concern of remote desert people is motor transport. The drive to acquire, extensively use and maintain vehicles is a feature of life in every community. This has stimulated the growth of micro industries – repair and trading of motor cars and parts. Contrary to urban myths, most Indigenous young men – and some women – have developed skills that serve their immediate needs for transport while providing valuable mechanical skills. It should be easy to document some of these initiatives.

**Cultural Initiatives.** Much can be said, too, about indigenous art enterprises, which have seen paintings and sculptures recognized as major national treasures – a source of income for a number of remote communities. These, certainly, are initiatives that could have never got off the ground had Aboriginal artists not have had the support of CDEP in the formative years of their enterprises and government support through enlightened grants and publicity.

In focusing on successful initiatives, consider the recent establishment of an internationally recognized museum of Western Desert art at the remote Warburton Community. The museum stimulates tourism while giving Indigenous artists an outlet for their works as well as training in marketing. This must be one of the most outstanding Aboriginal initiatives in Western Australia and a pioneer in the drive to stimulate controlled tourism in remote areas.

Also meriting attention are smaller artistic enterprises such as block printing, weaving and basketry, all of which are recent examples of successful initiatives. Emerging, too, are media enterprises planning and producing films and audiovisual programs in indigenous communities. With the advent of digital photography, it is now possible for a small committed team to acquire sophisticated but inexpensive cameras and editing equipment to document life in their communities as well as themes sensitive to their people. I am confident these efforts will soon find value in the entertainment marketplace.

**Education.** This must be the most discussed issue in the Aboriginal white 'industry', and a source of great angst throughout Australia, especially political parties presently vying for the attention of a concerned electorate.. If the purpose of this discussion paper to identify initiatives in remote Indigenous communities, there are many examples of success to be found in the Western Desert and The Kimberley. Of the 15 independent schools dedicated to Aboriginal education in Western Australia, the Committee

could point to Parnngurr Community School in the heart of the Great Sandy Desert (how could any school be more isolated!) Parnngurr features several programs that focus on children from primary to secondary, delivering innovative teaching strategies. Numerous other examples can be found through contacts with the Indigenous Schools network – itself a successful initiative demanding attention in this discussion paper..

**Housing.** As mentioned earlier, I am dismayed at the heavy emphasis the paper seems to put on Indigenous housing in remote communities. This is important, to be sure, but not as significant, I believe, as initiatives in health, education, employment. I note that the list of 13 persons giving briefings to the committee does not include specialists who would be expected to speak to such initiatives, although the two officers from the Department of Indigenous Affairs may have provided such background. I feel strongly that in focusing so much attention on housing-related issues the Committee has missed an opportunity to highlight positive, successful initiatives in human areas that really matter.

**Conclusion.** With respect to the officers who compiled this paper, and to the persons consulted, I have serious misgivings about the structure and thrust of the discussion paper. The historical background does little to explain what Indigenous communities are doing today. It continues a negative, bureaucratic, patronizing attitude towards Indigenous affairs. With its voluminous footnotes and academic aloofness, it misses its mark.



Well might we ask, where are the successful initiatives in this report? What communities are creating and pursuing them? How are the negative stereotypes we see so often in the West Australian media being overcome through grass-roots efforts by communities in the vast, remote parts of our State?

I strongly believe this discussion paper requires a major overhaul, enlightened editing, and further, on-the-ground research in the remote Indigenous communities themselves -- with the people who are making a difference.

This is too important a document to languish unread on the shelves of the Parliamentary Library, its terms of reference unmet and misunderstood.

Rasjad Moore



22 May 2007