

For our children's children: Nitmiluk and economic independence

**Robert Lee, Executive Director, Jawoyn Association
Indigenous Economic Development Forum, Alice Springs 6-7 March 2003**

Ladies and gentlemen.

I would first like to pay my respects to the Arrernte traditional owners of Alice Springs where we are meeting. I say this not just to be polite, but because it is Aboriginal Law to respect bosses and custodians of country. But also I said it because I want to share some ideas with the Arrernte people, as well as other Aboriginal nations in the Northern Territory.

One thing we should be clear about here today is that economic development for the countrymen and women of the Northern Territory is not a new idea. Aboriginal people have been saying that this is what we want for more than 25 years.

It is not a new idea that we want to break away from the days of welfare – we didn't wait for people in Queensland, or Canberra, or Darwin to tell us this. It is an idea we have had all over the Northern Territory for a long time.

It was an idea that the old people from the Jawoyn Nation had from the beginning when we put a land claim over Katherine Gorge back in 1978. Right back then, they said they were putting the land claim up so they could start businesses, and build training and jobs for their children and their children's children.

It is the same today.

We got Nitmiluk back in 1989, after a long land claim process. Part of the deal we made with the Northern Territory and Commonwealth governments back then was that we would lease the park land back to Parks and Wildlife for 99 years. That lease meant three things:

First, the Park was to be governed by an act of parliament – the Nitmiluk Act – which would protect Jawoyn interests during the operation of the lease. It is a very powerful law – the strongest in the Northern Territory – for the management of a national park.

Second, we would get an annual lease payment from Parks and Wildlife, as well as a percentage of turnover in commercial operations in the Park. In 1993, when we increased the size of the Park as a result of the Mt Todd Agreement, this lease money was increased. The lease payment is reviewed to keep up with inflation.

Third, the Park is managed by a Board that has a majority Jawoyn membership. The Board sets the Park's Plan of Management which governs the day-to-day running of the Park by Parks and Wildlife. It also sets policy over long term operations, commercial usage, environmental management, as well as cultural and heritage matters.

There have been many battles over the last 14 years of Aboriginal management at Nitmiluk ----- not least because non-Aboriginal people do not understand our commitments towards economic independence.

A recent example was the hysterical claims by a politician that the Jawoyn had lodged a “native title claim” over airspace at Nitmiluk when we sought to control helicopter flights above the Park.

This was a cowardly attack. It did not name the Jawoyn people, and was based on a complete lie. It was an issue of controlling noise levels above a pristine environment. It was about protecting the visitor experience, and therefore protecting our investments in the Park. It was about being smart businessmen. End of subject.

The long term aim of the Jawoyn people is to have complete Aboriginal management of Nitmiluk National Park.

This does not mean we won't share the Park with visitors – it just means that we believe we have the strength and capacity – as well as the traditional right – to look after the country properly.

The main strategy to achieve this is to do two things.

First, is to increase Aboriginal – especially Jawoyn – employment in the Park. Our aim here is as close as possible to 100 per cent Aboriginal employment, from the top to the bottom of the jobs, from cleaners, to rangers and guides, to scientists, to top managers.

If we don't have this as an objective, we will never achieve our dream of Aboriginal management.

Second is to maximise Aboriginal – especially Jawoyn – involvement in contracts and commercial operations at Nitmiluk. It is only through this economic activity that we can exert control over generating wealth from our traditional country while protecting the cultural and environmental value of our country.

We don't want to be just landlords on our lands – just collecting the rent. We need to be fully active in utilising the resources given to us by the old people.

Some of those commercial operations will be small scale, family or clan-based businesses such as the guided walks currently run at Leliyn by a young Jawoyn man, Ryan Barruwei.

Others will be larger scale, collectively owned businesses such as Nitmiluk Tours, which is a joint venture between the Jawoyn Association and a whitefella enterprise.

We chose the joint venture as a model to start commercial operations at Nitmiluk for three reasons.

First, it was a way of accessing capital. After winning our land claim, we were land rich, but had no cash to do anything with it. Back in 1993, when we set up the joint venture, 50 per cent came from a whitefella enterprise, 25 per cent from the Commercial Development Corporation, and 25 per cent from Jawoyn through a bank loan. We bought out the CDC in 1994, so we now own half Nitmiluk Tours, with an option to buy the other half in 2005.

Second, was that it was a way of spreading risk in the early days of Aboriginal engagement with commercial operations in the Park. Our joint venture partner has shared the financial risk – even through bad times such as the 1998 floods, the post-Olympic Games downturn, and the difficulties the tourist industry has faced after September 11th and Bali. This risk sharing has also assisted us in getting commercial loans because – let’s face it – banks are not used to lending big money to Aboriginal people.

The third reason is in sharing skills in management. Our joint venture partner had been at Nitmiluk, as well as tourism in the region, for 25 years before our deal with him. This has meant we have been able to learn from his experience from the small things like managing a fleet of boats, through to big picture issues such as international marketing.

Although we have a joint venture board of Management for Nitmiluk Tours, day-to-day management has been through Travel North – the company run by our partner.

For the first few years, our involvement in Nitmiluk Tours was pretty passive. It has not been easy. It has not been until the last year or so that we have started to feel like an equal partner.

While both partners in the joint venture have a shared commitment to achieving a profitable enterprise, we have not shared the same vision – the Aboriginal vision – of regaining control over our traditional lands. This is a difficult conflict to deal with, and there are no simple solutions to it.

One area in which we have not felt equal is over Aboriginal training and employment. A commitment to Aboriginal training and employment must be a long term one – and has an effect on profits in the short to medium term. Extremely poor education and health outcomes for Aboriginal people mean that training is a difficult task, with high failure levels. A lack of work culture amongst our people leads to great difficulties in staff retention. A lack of cross cultural training – in both directions – makes it hard to adapt work practices to the commercial environment.

The problems in training and employment reflect other difficulties in the joint venture scenario. While things are far more positive than five years ago, the fact we aim to buy out 100 per cent of the business in 2005 means that the partners have different approaches to long term, strategic planning and asset management.

Our commitment to maintain a viable business for generations to come is – for obvious reasons – different to that of a partner whose vision is limited to a few years.

This is not a criticism of our partner – but a key consideration to be taken into account in the joint venture environment.

So, while a joint venture has all the advantages I mentioned before, we have learnt lessons for ourselves, and for other countrymen and women considering it as a model.

First, from Day One you must insist on equal representation in the joint venture – don't be marginalised because it seems too hard. This might mean you have to employ your own experts to push hard for your interests from the sidelines.

Second, insist on a long term commitment to training and employment as a fundamental activity of the joint venture from the start.

Third, ensure there is open and transparent accountability between the partners. This means an open acknowledgment of each other's interests.

Finally, remain pro-active at all times – stay alert and do not drop your guard for a single moment.

Ladies and gentlemen, the Jawoyn Association is now consolidating its tourism investments, and working towards the 2005 buy out of Nitmiluk Tours. This will give us nearly total control over commercial operations in the Park.

We are also providing start up advice, mentoring and support for other Aboriginal tourism enterprises such as the guided walks at Leliyn and trialing a new product at Melkjalumbu, or Beswick Falls.

And we do this with minimal Government support.

Our medium term aspirations for Nitmiluk and Jawoyn land is to have:

- 100 per cent ownership of Nitmiluk Tours by 2005

- A unique nature-based experience with and by Aboriginal people
- A genuine cultural experience for our visitors
- Increased training and employment opportunities for Aboriginal people Nitmiluk and elsewhere on Jawoyn lands
- Rebranded the Nitmiluk experience with a greater Aboriginal focus.

Park management and commercial operations within national parks are good businesses for Aboriginal Territorians to have. With the change in government approach, we look forward to greatly increased Aboriginal involvement in parks in the Northern Territory as they settle land claim and native title issues in those parks.

I encourage countrymen and women throughout the Territory to embrace the Nitmiluk management model – and learn from our mistakes.

Take the responsibility and share parts of your country and our living cultures in a good way with fellow Australians and the rest of the world.

It is a difficult path, I know, but I always remember the words of the old people who started walking along this road. We are investing in the future for our children's children.

Thank you.