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Aboriginal mobility and the  
sustainability of communities:  
Case studies from north-west  
Queensland and  
eastern Northern Territory

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# Contents

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Introduction	1
Research methods	1
Mobility patterns	3
Temporary visitation	3
Temporal influences over mobility	3
Motivators for travel	3
The mobility region	4
Findings on migration	4
Service and policy implications of mobility	5
Effective centralisation of services	5
Decentralised regional service delivery	7
Servicing mobile people	7
Cross-border discontinuities	8
The interconnectedness of policy issues	9
The significance of transport and improved road services	9
Conclusion – mobility and the sustainability of communities	10
References	12



# Introduction

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Aboriginal people in remote and rural Australia are frequently moving between places. Mobility was and still is key to the maintenance of Aboriginal relationships to places, or country, and to the maintenance of social relationships. A distinct range of socio-cultural, economic and political factors and aspirations motivate these movements. There exists a culture of mobility amongst the Aboriginal population of Australia. Yet despite the widespread reporting of high mobility in the ethnographic and housing literature, relatively little is known of the nature of this culture of mobility and in particular its implications for services. The aim of this paper is to consider the role of mobility in sustaining and expressing Aboriginal attachments to places and social relations, as well as the relationship between mobility and service needs.

The paper draws on case studies of Aboriginal mobility from an Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute<sup>1</sup> (AHURI) funded research project by Memmott et al (2004, 2006). This project examined the mobility of the Alpururulam community, which is based on a land excision in an eastern Northern Territory pastoral lease, and the mobility of the Aboriginal community of Dajarra, a small town in north-west Queensland. For both communities Mt Isa is a regional social and service centre and the Georgina River is their heartland. According to the ARIA<sup>2</sup> classification, these places are located in remote and very remote Australia (ABS 2001). This classification is based on the relative distance an Australian population must travel to access a full range of services. However, from an Aboriginal perspective remoteness might also be defined as relative distance from one's homeland or the ability or ease with which people can access their homeland(s). For the Dajarra and Alpururulam communities and in many other instances this would produce an inversion of the ARIA classification, that is, parts of Australia that are very remote in terms of service delivery are often highly accessible in terms of 'home' and 'country'.

Where relevant, this paper makes comparisons with the Tangentyere Council Research Unit's recent study of population and mobility in the Alice Springs Town Camps (Foster et al 2005). In so doing a goal of this paper is to provide a foundation from which future projects, such as the Desert Knowledge CRC's 'Demand Responsive Services to Desert Settlements', could further explore the tension between access to services and the maintenance of relationships with country in a manner that positively reflects the aspirations and service demands of remote Aboriginal communities (Memmott et al 2004:8–10; see Desert Knowledge CRC 2006).

## Research methods

The literature on Aboriginal mobility can be grouped into two broad categories: (1) ethnographic literature concerned with the cultural experience and role of Aboriginal mobility, and (2) demographic literature which is primarily concerned with migration. Most studies of Aboriginal mobility by demographers equate mobility with change in a person's usual place of residence. Such studies are usually reliant on the enumeration of the Australian Bureau of Statistics' Census and

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<sup>1</sup> Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute. The reader is referred to the AHURI website (<http://www.ahuri.edu.au/publications>) for the full versions of these two reports which contain all of the detailed findings as well as an outline of the methodology and survey instruments.

<sup>2</sup> Accessibility/Remoteness Index of Australia (see ABS 2001).

subject to its inaccuracies. Knowledge gaps remain within both categories of literature (Young & Doohan 1989:20; Taylor & Bell 1996:397; Martin & Taylor 1996; Taylor & Bell 1999:3, 2004a:6; Martin et al 2002; Foster et al 2005:1, 8).

In addressing the gaps in the literature both our study, and that of the Tangentyere Council Research Unit (Foster et al 2005), are part of an emerging third area of research that sits between the aforementioned categories. Although our study investigated the demographer's interest in the 'change in usual place of residence', it also pursued a fine-grain understanding of Aboriginal mobility – one that reflected Aboriginal experiences – and involved smaller intervals of time and space that had not been empirically addressed in the literature to date. This small-scale pursuit is also a characteristic of the Tangentyere study (Foster et al 2005). Our project considered various spatial (intra-settlement, intra-regional, inter-regional) and temporal (short-term, long-term) scales of mobility that involve a range of settlement types as well as destination places outside of the study settlements<sup>3</sup>. We examined the extent of such movements and the causal factors that underlay them.

A regional approach was taken in order to study the relationships between a major service centre and outlying communities. Mt Isa and its surrounds were selected because it acts as a service centre for communities within both north-west Queensland (Dajarra) and the eastern Northern Territory (Alpurrurulam). In 2001 the estimated Aboriginal populations of these communities were 163 and 334 respectively.<sup>4</sup>

The aim of the field survey was to gain both qualitative and quantitative data on Aboriginal mobility. Four categories of people were targeted for survey-based interviews within each community: (1) household heads, (2) young men, (3) young women, and (4) service providers. There were five key fields of data to the survey, (1) identity of home community and country, (2) household characteristics, (3) the movement patterns of householders and young people, (4) the identity of the householder's relatives and their movement patterns, and (5) motivators of mobility. In contrast to the Tangentyere study (2005:9) our project did not aim to produce an accurate census of the case study communities; instead the goal was to sample the mobility patterns of these communities. Whereas the Tangentyere team were able to pursue an accurate census by surveying the same households four times over a year, our survey was conducted once in each location and relied on the participants' memories of their recent travels (see Memmott et al 2006:11–12, 112–130; Foster et al 2005:2, 9).

Following the collection of information from Dajarra and Alpurrurulam, team members visited relatives of participants who were living in the regional centre of Mt Isa and the east coast centre of Townsville. The aim was to gain information regarding community residents travelling to regional centres from the perspectives of their hosts. A qualitative understanding of flows and shifts between the two remote settlements and urban centres was achieved.

<sup>3</sup> We gained some understanding of the mobility patterns associated with places 'out bush'. However, based on our experience in the study region we know that the survey did not pick up on the full repertoire of places visited to access bush resources or the frequency of such visits (see Long 2005). Most mobility studies seem to overlook such mobility despite the fact that the customary economy is critical to any assessment of the sustainability of remote communities.

<sup>4</sup> Local organisations report much higher populations. Steve Long reported such discrepancies in the Dajarra population estimates in 1997 (in Memmott et al 1997:25–26) when the Aboriginal organisation and health clinic in Dajarra placed the Aboriginal population at around 300 whereas the ABS recorded an Aboriginal population of 154 in 1991 and 171 in 1996



## Mobility patterns

### Temporary visitation

A strong pattern of mobility practice that emerged in the study was frequent travel to visit places within the region for relatively short periods of time. During such visits, people mostly relied on relatives for accommodation or they camped.<sup>5</sup> The most common period of visitation was two to three days or less and most visits were for less than one month. The highest frequency of visitation reported to one place was an average of 39 trips per year per visitor by Alpururulam men to Mt Isa. At any point in time it seems that around a third of the households in Alpururulam, Dajarra and Mt Isa are likely to have visitors. The Tangentyere study also found around 30% of the town camp population were visitors and that visits were also mostly short term.<sup>6</sup>

### Temporal influences over mobility

The pattern of mobility is associated with a calendar of annual Aboriginal social, economic and regional events. In particular, the calendar of popular regional sporting events triggers mobility and provides significant social events and times of recreation, which also contribute to the regional economy. Mobility patterns are also influenced by the timing of work, school, and holidays (for example, seasonal cattle station employment). It is noteworthy that our survey, the recent Tangentyere survey and the 2001 ABS census of discrete central Australian communities were all timed to avoid known periods of high mobility within this calendar such as Christmas and Easter breaks, regional sporting carnivals, shows, and periods of ceremonial activity (the latter can also be a period of restricted mobility) (Foster et al 2005:11, 14, 18; Sanders 2002:78; Peterson 2004.)<sup>7</sup>

Mobility patterns are also influenced by seasonal climatic events. Firstly, seasonal events determine the availability of bush resources and thus the movements of people to hunt and collect bush foods.<sup>8</sup> Secondly, seasonal rain prohibits or restricts mobility. For example, due to poor roads the Alpururulam community has to plan carefully for access to services during 'the wet' season, a matter made critical by the absence of a sealed surface to the local airstrip.

### Motivators for travel

The findings of this survey support earlier findings from the Aboriginal mobility literature – kinship is the great driving force of Aboriginal mobility.<sup>9</sup> Kinship and social interaction (including funerals) constituted the most common reason given for travel (Memmott et al 2006:93). Similarly the Tangentyere survey found that 'family visits' were the most common reason for households

<sup>5</sup> The rate of camping responses in the survey reflected the significant rate of visitation to bush locations such as the Georgina River and visitation to events in small bush communities such as Urandangi. In this region people usually camp with family or in clusters of family groups, thus when people travel they mostly 'stay' with relatives.

<sup>6</sup> Of durations of up to six weeks (Foster et al 2005:16, 19, 21, 30, 44).

<sup>7</sup> Avoiding these 'spikes' or 'peaks' in mobility means that such mobility may be poorly understood. Further research is required to determine the nature of Aboriginal mobility during these peak periods.

<sup>8</sup> For example, as this paper was written in mid-May 2006 one of the authors (Long) received reports of an increase in the number of trips to the Georgina River from Dajarra as fish were 'on the bite' following recent rainfall.

<sup>9</sup> Aboriginal kinship is defined by blood ties, marriage, and through a classificatory system of relationships which extends the range of kin to many others in the wider society.

to receive visitors (Foster et al 2005:38). Much mobility can be defined as a social process geared simultaneously towards the enjoyment of social interaction, the maintenance of social relationships and the maintenance of social identity. Thus when people visit family and friends they are not merely taking part in an enjoyable social occasion, they are also reinforcing reciprocal ties and obligations, all of which are essential parts of their social fabric (see Foster et al 2005:35). Kinship is maintained through mobility, kinship makes mobility possible, kinship supports mobility, and kinship contributes to the definition of mobility regions.

Other categories of motivators for travel in descending order of importance, as scored by the survey participants, were sporting events and recreation, hunting and bush resources, shopping, employment participation, visiting traditional country and obtaining health-related services. The Tangentyere survey found similar reasons for mobility (Foster et al 2005:38).

## The mobility region

The literature indicates that much of the Australian Aboriginal population, particularly in rural and remote areas, can be categorised into contemporary regional groupings, each usually associated with a regional centre and a mobility region. However we found that the mobility region cannot be simply modelled as a discrete bounded area in which the members of all constituent communities share a common pattern of spatial circulation. Rather there appears to be an inner region of common movement including the regional centre, but with the movement patterns of individual communities varying, dependent on their unique history of past migration and particular cultural and socio-economic linkages, some of which extend into surrounding regions.

Such centrifugal movements make it difficult to define any clear outer boundary to the mobility region, yet a range of factors provide a sense of integrity to the region when viewed from its centre. These factors include proximity to, identification with and ongoing usage of traditional homelands or country; the shared perception of the Georgina River as ‘heartland’ country; traditional forms of socio-economic interaction between local language or tribal groups manifested in ongoing regional marriage endogamy; shared social histories of being reared in home communities and ongoing attachment to them; the resultant network of kin in the region who provide both a social reason for visitation and hosted venues for visitors; and the powerful attraction of the regional centre both in terms of its social networks and its recreational opportunities. Mt Isa is a centre for a number of mobility regions including that of the Dajarra and Alpurrurulam communities and other mobility regions such as the mobility region of ‘the Gulf’ communities such as Doomadgee, Mornington Island and Burketown (southern Gulf of Carpentaria). Similarly the Tangentyere study identified the role of Alice Springs as a centre for a number of mobility regions (Foster et al 2005:5, 31; see also Taylor 2002:10, 11).

## Findings on migration

We make a clear distinction between ‘migration’ in the sense of settling down in a new home, and ‘temporary visitation’. This study indicates that in contrast to any literature findings or arguments that indicate a trend of migration to the east coast, most of the Aboriginal population in the current

study region remained within the region where they were reared and where their traditional country is situated (Taylor & Bell 1999:28; Memmott et al 2004:26–30). It is clear that while people regularly move, their movements are for the most part confined to within this mobility region or cultural region.

There was evidence of a pattern of migration to the regional centre of Mt Isa, being a generation or two in depth. There was a similar pattern of migration in the recent history of the Alice Springs Town Camps (Foster et al 2005:4–7). Our study found a minor pattern of migration outside of the region to more distant places (specifically Townsville), but the numbers involved appeared small. Similarly the Tangentyere study found that those people who had moved from town camp households had remained in the region – they had either gone to other town camps or other housing options in Alice Springs or to the surrounding and outlying language group areas of central Australia (Foster et al 2005:31).

## Service and policy implications of mobility

Decision-making on public expenditure that encourages or discourages mobility, and whether it responds to Aboriginal mobility preferences, is a contentious policy issue as indicated by the human geographers Taylor and Bell:

*A tension is evident between the strength afforded to government and developmental agency in directing or enabling migration flows...and the primacy and continuity of Indigenous culture in giving expression to mobility outcomes.* (Taylor & Bell 2004a:8.)<sup>10</sup>

Our survey highlights the need for policy to be developed on the basis of localised movements within a region and a strong relationship between the regional centre and outlying communities. Aboriginal mobility regions should be seen as the basis for service delivery (also see Young & Doohan 1989:217). Service maintenance and development is required both in the regional centre and in outlying communities, albeit in both centralised and decentralised forms. Ten areas of service provision were found to be of high relevance to Aboriginal people in the study region and these services were strongly intertwined with the pattern of mobility:<sup>11</sup> (1) recreation and sports, (2) shopping and store services, (3) employment, training and social security, (4) visiting traditional country, (5) health services, (6) educational services, (7) police, court and correctional services, (8) housing and accommodation services, (9) aged care and funerals, (10) transport and road services.

## Effective centralisation of services

The survey data clearly indicated that Mt Isa was the place most commonly and frequently visited by Dajarra and Alpururulam householders. The data indicated that the 47 household survey participants from Dajarra and Alpururulam made a total of approximately 1000 visits to Mt Isa between them over one year. Most visits to Mt Isa were of a short duration – people often attended

<sup>10</sup> Also see Taylor (1989) for a relevant case study in the Katherine region.

<sup>11</sup> Findings on policy implications for each of these service areas are outlined in the full report (Memmott et al 2006:94-108).

to their business in Mt Isa and then returned home. The Tangentyere report suggests that a similar pattern of short-term mobility occurs between outlying communities and Alice Springs (Foster et al 2005:19, 36, 38). Shopping was given as the single most common reason for visiting Mt Isa, followed by visiting family and friends in the case of Dajarra people, and sports and funerals in the case of Alpururulam people. Mt Isa is clearly an important socio-economic centre for the mobility region.

A major policy implication of the identified migrations to Mt Isa is the lack of readily available housing (public and private sector rentals and home ownership). The Tangentyere report suggests that there are similar housing issues in Alice Springs (Foster et al 2005:44). However, in our study relatively few instances were recorded of people travelling to the regional centre of Mt Isa specifically to access rental housing or housing services. Whereas the Mt Isa participants did indicate that they received visitors who were waiting to get a house in Mt Isa, it seems that such people were travelling to Mt Isa largely for other reasons (health, education) and then once addressing these goals, accessing housing options. This suggests that housing need is a product of mobility, not a trigger for mobility. By contrast, the Tangentyere survey found that housing was the second highest reason why Alice Springs Town Camp households had received visitors from outlying communities (Foster et al 2005:38).

Some Aboriginal households in the regional centre of Mt Isa play a critical regional role, acting as a base for relatives from outlying communities (particularly given the lengthy waiting times for rental housing). For example, a succession of nieces, nephews and grandchildren come to stay once it is their time to attend high school. Future houses and renovations in the regional centre should be designed to accommodate such semi-permanent migration of relatives.

Given the high frequency of visitation to regional centres such as Mt Isa to access services, there is an ongoing need to ensure adequate availability of temporary forms of accommodation, such as hostels or community-owned houses. There is a particular need for accommodation options for families visiting relatives who are in hospital, as well as for those who need to make medical appointments in town, for either overnight or daytime procedures. The Tangentyere study similarly illustrated a significant need for additional short-term accommodation options in Alice Springs (Foster et al 2005:44).

A related set of policy issues apply to the secondary school experience. To attend high school, students throughout the study region must move to the regional centre of Mt Isa, or outside their normal mobility region to more distant centres. Such moves are difficult for young people and it is often the first time in their lives they are separated from their families, community and their regular patterns of mobility. As a result, in some instances, entire households migrate to ensure successful access to high school. Transition programs that aim to prepare year seven students for their first year at high school have merit (e.g. visiting high school locations, experiencing the daily school activities, attending a school camp, and visits to alternative colleges). A related policy aspect is the range of specialised services offered to ensure Aboriginal boarding students are given culturally appropriate support, guidance and encouragement (carers, tutors, extended family involvement, transport assistance, family visits, parental liaison, accommodation for visiting kin).

## Decentralised regional service delivery

While some services will only be economically viable if they are operated from a regional centre, there may be others, or elements of services, that could be decentralised, or that will be most effective if they remain decentralised. Better electronic and telephonic communication facilities have assisted with decentralisation and regionalisation of services. The recent regional expansion and sophistication of the Community Development Employment Program (CDEP) administration at the time of the survey provided more flexibility for mobile workers across the study region, e.g. by allowing transfers of CDEP positions between communities, increased incomes and travel for CDEP work. This was further facilitated via the decentralisation of Centrelink through its agency system in small communities, together with the acculturation of electronic banking amongst remote Aboriginal people. Thus policy has the task of maintaining a balance between locally sustaining the service requirements of outlying communities and rationalising the appropriate aspects of service provision in the regional centre.

## Servicing mobile people

As people are regularly on the move within the region, local community agencies provide a significant proportion of their services to non-permanent residents. For example, both the Dajarra and Alpururulam health clinics were experiencing annual consultation loads of over 5,500 persons, mostly Aboriginal. The workload arising from non-residents, visitors and other irregular users may be as high as that arising from local residents. A critical health policy issue was the strategic balance of bringing specialists to small communities for regular consultation sessions, versus the logistic problems of transporting needy patients to Mt Isa to meet specialist appointments there. Health services noted a degree of failure by people from remote communities to attend hospital appointments in regional centres and attributed this to a preference to remain with families in their home communities. This highlights the need for services to be designed to meet a 'service population' and not an 'in-residence population' or base population. The Tangentyere study estimated the service population in the Alice Springs Town Camps to be 30–40% greater than the base population (Foster et al 2005:44).<sup>12</sup>

Another important area of visitor impact occurs in the housing sector. Regular household sizes in Dajarra and Alpururulam, despite being large, increased further at times due to short-term visitation by kin, thus placing further pressure on architectural performance (plumbing, waste disposal, energy needs). When the householders themselves travelled away from Dajarra and Alpururulam during the year prior to the survey, it was found the respondents often stayed with family members. In both communities most houses contained only three bedrooms or less. A significant policy issue was that small houses with high household numbers and a high turnover in visitors were likely to require more frequent maintenance than would otherwise be the case due to the natural wear and tear associated with high use by a large household. In the Tangentyere study, damage to property was identified by householders as one of the 'bad things' associated with visitors (Foster et al 2005:37). The nature of the daily use of houses by different social groups and the daily fluctuations in household size and composition were not recorded in our survey or in the Tangentyere survey. However, a significant insight to the potential magnitude of the flow of

<sup>12</sup> See also Young & Doohan 1989:220; Martin & Taylor 1996:18, 20-21, 28; Memmott et al 2004:37.

people through a household is Musharbash's (2003) study of women's camps (*jilimi*) in Yuendumu. Musharbash (2003:122–138) mapped the sleeping arrangements of a house and yard-based *jilimi*<sup>13</sup> for 221 nights over a 467 day period. A significant finding of this mapping was that more than 160 different individuals slept in the *jilimi* during those 221 nights. There is thus a strong requirement for the ongoing and adequate funding of regular housing and infrastructure maintenance regimes. This is a significant issue facing community housing organisations and state and territory housing agencies. It is a significant issue that must be considered by proponents of home ownership in remote communities and in the design of home ownership schemes (see Moran et al 2002).

The pressure on housing stock and household numbers could be reduced by a substantial government funding increase that addresses the deficit in housing supply. Future houses and renovations to housing in remote centres should be designed to accommodate preferred household size(s) and composition(s) and to facilitate the visitation of kin.<sup>14</sup> In some instance this may mean the need for larger houses with more bedrooms. However whether houses are large or small they must be designed so that visitors can be accommodated in a culturally appropriate manner (this is likely to vary across the diverse Aboriginal cultural groups of Australia). This may involve attributes such as well-sized, well-positioned and perhaps well-screened verandah spaces; adequately sized living spaces that can be used to accommodate temporary campers; detached shade structures that can accommodate visitors; well-designed wet areas; additional showers<sup>15</sup> and toilets; appropriately sized rainwater tanks; and well-designed external living environments to accommodate externally-oriented patterns of domiciliary behaviour (including outdoor sleeping). As large households can contribute to higher energy consumption, greater consideration of alternative energy sources and the design of houses that maximise passive heating and cooling are strongly recommended (see also Memmott & Chambers 2003; Foster et al 2005:37).

## Cross-border discontinuities

Where a state border cuts across an Aboriginal mobility region, the different state (or territory) policies can result in discontinuities and inequities of services and hardship for Aboriginal people. Once again, regional coordination that draws upon cross-government partnerships is desirable.

For example, this study found service discontinuities in the current study region as a result of its straddling two state justice, police and correctional systems with dissimilar policies. Given the ongoing rates of Indigenous deaths in custody, the transportation of offenders over long distances to courts and prisons away from their home communities and kin from whom they can gain a level of support has significant policy implications. In western Queensland, there was an integrated policy whereby a system of community service projects were maintained in most towns and communities, which allowed those with minor offences to return to their home communities. It would be advantageous if cross-jurisdictional policy could facilitate the extension of this scheme into the Northern Territory so as to include Alpururulam. Similar issues pertain

<sup>13</sup> The *jilimi* contains a gender-specific domiciliary group (only women) occupying a domiciliary space which, depending on the season, traditionally contained particular types of self-constructed shelters (windbreak, shade, enclosed shelter). In this case study, these informal shelters were combined in a yard with a four-bedroom cottage to make up the *jilimi*.

<sup>14</sup> Further research is required to determine whether Aboriginal families wish to live in small households or in large extended family households.

<sup>15</sup> In a house with 15 occupants and one shower, it could take 2.5 hours or longer for the whole household to shower.

to other parts of Australia where Aboriginal cultural regions straddle state boundaries, e.g. the Anangu Pitjantjatjara Aboriginal cultural region on the borders between Western Australia, South Australia and the Northern Territory.

## The interconnectedness of policy issues

The policies of different government agencies and service providers which can effect or generate mobility patterns can be intertwined in unexpected and complex ways. For example, significant rates of mobility occurred in the study region for the purpose of attending and participating in sport events. Considering the poor overall status of Aboriginal health, preventative health measures could consist of health services encouraging, supporting and sponsoring male and female junior and senior sports activities and active recreation. Another policy implication is the economic benefits of regional sports and recreation, for example the acquisition of pastoral skills through rodeos and horse races.<sup>16</sup> Nevertheless there were found to be minimal sport and recreational services and facilities being provided in Dajarra and Alpururulam at the time of the survey.

Thus a holistic understanding of the relationship between mobility and a particular policy and service area is required. Mobility and health do not just encompass the travel required to access centralised health services in the regional centre, and the nature of decentralised health services in an outlying community, or the size of the mobile service population. This relationship is also about the sustainability of healthy living practices – sport, access to bush tucker, and visits to country. It is also about the negative health implications that may arise from mobility and measures to mitigate them (e.g. measures to reduce injury and deaths related to transport accidents).

## The significance of transport and improved road services

Dajarra and Alpururulam residents make regular visitation to Mt Isa as their regional service centre. The average number of trips per year made to Mt Isa by each of the Dajarra participants was: householders, 27 trips per year; male participants, 12 trips per year; and female participants, 7 trips per year. Whereas the average number of trips per year made to Mt Isa by each of the Alpururulam participants was: householders, 26 trips per year; men, 39 trips per year; and women, 32 trips per year. This frequency of travel suggests that if certain desired services are not decentralised, Aboriginal people are likely to continue to travel to seek them. It is also likely that Aboriginal people will continue to travel frequently to sustain social relationships and relationships with country. Such high mobility has implications for the safety and economy of vehicular travel and the condition of roads. The Tangentyere study argued that mobility can be dangerous and destructive, citing high rates of road fatalities in Central Australia and significant rates of Aboriginal incarceration for traffic offences (Foster et al 2005:45; see Pleshet 2006).<sup>17</sup>

<sup>16</sup> It was found there is popular community support to maintain regional sporting events despite increases in event costs (particularly public liability insurance and the cost of travel to sport events for individuals and teams).

<sup>17</sup> Long (2005:296-306) provides an account of the tension between Aboriginal desires to attend a significant regional social event in northwest Queensland – the Urandangi rodeo – and the policing of Aboriginal vehicles travelling there.

Alpurrurulam experienced major difficulties with the transportation of both medical patients and bio samples in the wet season due to its unsealed access roads and airstrip. This in turn placed increased pressure and cost on the Mt Isa (and Townsville) hospital due to patients waiting longer than necessary to return home. The inability of the Flying Doctor to make emergency landings at Alpurrurulam in the wet could have fatal consequences.

## Conclusion – mobility and the sustainability of communities

Recent attempts to question the sustainability of remote Aboriginal communities solely on simplistic economic grounds (see Windschuttle 2006), often coupled with calls to enforce Aboriginal migrations to centralised service centres, are not new. In 1901, Archibald Meston, the Southern and Central Protector of Aboriginals, advised the Queensland Government to discontinue services provided to Aboriginal people in western Queensland:

*Where it is absolutely imperative to supply rations to destitute Western Blacks, I would earnestly advise that these people be marched to the nearest Railway Station and sent to one of the Reserves where the cost of feeding has been reduced to a minimum and they can have some occupation and live healthy and decent lives. Feeding them in their western environment means actually encouraging their degradation and is in all ways most unsatisfactory (Meston 1901).<sup>18</sup>*

Meston never succeeded in his great exile of Aboriginal people from north-west Queensland. Instead the Aboriginal population of the Queensland/Territory border region has maintained attachments to place and to kin through mobility, and they have provided a valuable, mobile labour pool that has been critical to the development and economic success of the remote pastoral industry (Long 2005:132–134).

This study has found that the Aboriginal people of Dajarra, Alpurrurulam and Mt Isa, although exceptionally mobile by Australian mainstream standards, are for the most part, relatively stable in their customary attachment to their home community, local bush country and their cultural region (or mobility region). This is despite the hardships of living in remote semi-arid locations, despite the past eras of forced migration that have displaced people to some extent from their traditional countries, despite greater freedom and capacity to travel, and despite the contemporary opportunities for migration to coastal and capital cities. Attachment to place and community prevail, irrespective of a history of changing government policies. There appears to be no reason to expect that these attachments will change in the foreseeable future. A key characteristic of an Aboriginal culture of mobility is that it sustains relationships with places and it sustains social relationships, and in turn, social relationships sustain mobility. This Aboriginal culture of mobility is also characterised by marked inter-and intra-community mobility with circular movements, within a ‘mobility region’. The distribution of a person’s kin within the region generates a ‘beat’ – a set of places where he or she can visit and expect to obtain hospitality and economic support if necessary, and in which a person will most likely find their spouse. Nevertheless, Aboriginal people also continue to travel very frequently in order to participate in such mainstream services

<sup>18</sup> Meston wanted to ‘march’ Aboriginal people 600 kilometres to the nearest railhead as he considered transport by horse drawn coaches economically unviable.



as shopping, sporting events, education, health services and employment. Yet it is often Aboriginal social relationships that make access to these services possible; this was illustrated by the role of households in regional centres (Mt Isa and Alice Springs) in providing support to those family members travelling from outlying communities.

Residential mobility in this part of Aboriginal Australia thus involves conceptualising ‘the community’ as a regional network of kin and settlement centres, and with individuals constantly in mobility. In the authors’ view, policy, services and economic development should be shaped around this reality. The challenge for communities and services is the maintenance of a balance between meeting the local service demands of outlying communities and sustaining access to centralised services in a manner that reflects the desires of Aboriginal people to sustain social relationships and relationships with country (see Taylor & Bell 2004b:17). A fuller understanding of the mobility patterns of remote Aboriginal communities in Australia will arise from further comparative studies of other regional service centres<sup>19</sup> and their outlying communities.

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<sup>19</sup> For example, Thursday Island, Cairns, Darwin, Tennant Creek, Ceduna, Port Hedland, Geraldton and Broome.

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