

**SUBMISSION TO THE
NATIVE TITLE DISCUSSION PAPER**

By

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Background

The Desert Knowledge Cooperative Research Centre (DKCRC) is a partnership of 28 agencies, government departments, non-government organisations, desert communities and universities whose research focuses on the people and communities of the remote arid regions – the three per cent of Australians who live on 70 per cent of the land mass. We cover four States and the Northern Territory from the edge of the Great Dividing Range to the Indian Ocean. This means we operate across jurisdictions, within the boundaries of the desert and not within state or territory borders, to provide a truly national perspective on desert living.

DKCRC also works across disciplines and sectors, bringing together biophysical and social scientists, Aboriginal people, industry representatives including resource developers, tourism operators, pastoralists and policy and service delivery agencies from all levels of government.

Our research program is integrated, rather than strictly discipline-based. Our objectives are to:

- Provide sustainable livelihoods for desert people that are based on natural resource and service enterprise opportunities that are environmentally and socially appropriate
- Encourage sustainable remote desert settlements that support the presence of desert people, particularly remote Aboriginal communities, as a result of improved and efficient governance and access to services
- Foster thriving desert regional economies that are based on desert competitive advantages, bringing together Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal communities, government and industry
- Apply social science insights into governance, human capacity and the design of appropriate institutions to all of these outcomes.

The program involves scientific and technical research, which ranges from environmental research to appropriate housing and infrastructure design and often means applying existing technology to new ends or making systems work better for desert people. At the same time, we apply social science insights to what makes communities work and to how we can develop appropriate and sustainable local-level economic activity to support these communities.

Taking research into the desert community is not simply a matter of what our research partners bring: it is also about what they learn from the experience. The Desert Knowledge CRC has evolved because of its ability to develop meaningful collaborations. Clearly this is a feature of successful CRCs, where the collaboration between Centre Partners and Associates is critical to operating effectively. But the success of DKCRC in overcoming the tyranny of distance has taught us the true importance of collaboration for effective desert engagement. In our region, we take the time and make the effort to build relationships because we have come to understand that successful collaboration depends on those relationships.

We have developed collaborations involving business and industry, between the designers and suppliers of technology and end-users, as a platform for research into better ways of doing things in, for example, improving cattle management in the pastoral industry or investigating factors making for success for Aboriginal business.

Aboriginal people are significant contributors to our research program and we work extensively with people in remote Aboriginal communities on collaborative projects researching sustainable housing, water use, infrastructure and business development as well as natural resource management. Their knowledge is integral to our research and valuing Aboriginal

intellectual property is embedded in our practice and philosophy. DKCRC has a Protocol for Aboriginal Knowledge and Intellectual Property and an accompanying Good Manners Guide for working with Aboriginal people. This relationship is reciprocal: we share knowledge and we learn from each other's ways of doing things.

Our Desert Knowledge – and the way we do it - is exportable, not just to other countries with large desert areas, but also to countries with small and dispersed remote area populations. The recent Desert Knowledge Symposium 2008 was attended by delegates from India and South Africa and we have presented our research at conferences in Mongolia, China and the United States and Canada.

The Discussion Paper

The Native Title Discussion Paper is a creditable synthesis of the Working Group's Report. The issues have been thoroughly canvassed and we support its broad directions. Our response in this submission is to offer some perspectives that are informed by our work in Australia's remote regions. These regions are characterised by:

- sparse and often highly mobile populations which lack the critical mass to be more than a distant voice in coastal focused political centres and the market place
- pronounced cultural diversity with rich local Aboriginal knowledge and with Aboriginal languages alive, well and in contemporary use
- limited economic opportunity and poor employment prospects, although deserts make a major contribution to the Australian economy through mining, pastoralism, tourism and art
- narrow range of government (housing, income support, defence) and private investment compared with coastal towns and communities
- a high proportion of significant natural and cultural resource icons (Uluru, McDonnell Ranges, Simpson, Tanami, Western and Great Sandy deserts, Channel Country) whose protection now and in the future is of national significance.

These factors are what we refer to as the 'Desert Drivers'. The traditional view of deserts is that they are deficit-ridden and people freely use terms like 'miles from anywhere', 'the back of beyond' and so on to conceptualise their mental model of deserts. Yet the desert syndrome means that desert Australia functions differently from more settled regions and not better or worse. If we understand the effects of the desert drivers properly, then we can target policy, management and research more effectively.

We are now mentally mapping desert living as an asset model. This approach looks for ways of living with and taking advantage of the differences inherent in desert living by researching and applying ways to:

- take advantage of options for local livelihoods, including social, community and cultural services
- develop the kind of systems and structures that will build a regional critical mass and at the same time maintain local accountability
- install tiered governance allowing for local and regional autonomy, boosting the local voice, allowing for differences and enabling demand rather than supply to drive services
- develop and use local skills wherever possible
- establish transparent and independent capital and recurrent funding mechanisms.

This approach has significant implications for ways in which benefits from Native Title Agreements might be maximized and it is encouraging that both the Working Group Report and the Discussion Paper focus on improving the outcomes of agreements from the ground up. Flexibility, diversity and transparency are clearly a critical foundation for sustainable settlements. Using Native Title Agreements to build local skill bases and create local economies through small business development is in line with our approach to building assets rather than propping up deficits.

Clearly, as you note, there remains a role for government in investing in infrastructure and the benefits of Native Title Agreements should not be diverted to propping up ageing plant, equipment and systems. Equally, however, this investment should be a basis for building livelihoods for local people in maintaining that infrastructure – housing, water and power supplies and so on. These livelihoods may well be supported through Agreements that create opportunities for training and skill development.

Future Directions

Our research teams have come to understand the relationship between sustainable and effective policy and a solid body of evidence. We have developed the ability to provide sound advice on resource demand and supply in desert communities and the factors driving successful service delivery. Our research focuses on practical applications that will make an impact on policy makers. We are continuing to develop awareness of policy perspectives among our researchers

While we are in a transitional stage at present and formulating a rebid proposal for continuing funding and other contributions from our Partners, this will continue to be a central feature of our work. We will be in a position to continue providing advice and accepting commissioned research projects. We may in the future, for instance, help Government evaluate the effectiveness of any revisions to the Native Title Act which may arise from these current deliberations.