

# Kimberley resources key to indigenous people's future

Government, corporations and traditional owners must work together, writes **Wayne Bergmann**.

**G**as development in the Kimberley presents major opportunities and major challenges for Aboriginals. Better than anyone, traditional owners know the beauty and value of the Kimberley environment and their responsibility to protect it and their cultural heritage.

At the same time, our responsibilities must also include bringing our people out of poverty. Aboriginal children born today in WA face life expectancies up to 20 years less than non-indigenous children.

Fewer than 20 per cent of Aboriginal West Australians are likely to own their own home. And even during a resource boom and skills shortage, only 16 per cent of Aboriginals in the Kimberley participate in the mainstream labour market.

That is why, represented by the Kimberley Land Council, traditional owners are negotiating an active role in shaping development and a major share of its benefits.

Government must support this initiative by insisting that development cannot occur without the informed consent of Aboriginal traditional owners. It must also ensure that traditional owners have the resources required to negotiate with companies whose annual turnover exceeds the gross domestic product of many countries.

Traditional owners in the Kimberley are not just focused on achieving economic

benefits. We are not interested in "development at any cost".

Traditional owners insist that development must occur in ways that protect environmental and cultural values, because for us land is an integral part of who we are and is central to our culture and our wellbeing.

By supporting this approach, governments not only support Aboriginals but ensure that development will be in the long-term interest of all Australians.

It is no longer acceptable for mining companies to do "cheap" compensation deals in order to gain the right to do whatever they want on Aboriginal land. Nor is it acceptable for governments to approve the destruction of irreplaceable cultural heritage as we saw happen with the bulldozing of precious rock art on the Burrup Peninsula.

These old ways are being replaced by joint partnerships between government, resource companies and traditional owners that provide the opportunity for long-term economic benefits for communities.

For example, the agreement brokered by the Kimberley Land Council between Argyle Diamond Mines and Kija and Miriuwung traditional owners to allow underground expansion of the Argyle mine includes indigenous employment targets, seed funding for small business proposals,

strong accountability mechanisms and a sustainability fund to provide income beyond the lifespan of the mine.

Each week new mine employees and contractors participate in a Manthe ceremony conducted by local elders to welcome them, keep them safe and ensure local cultural practices are part of their daily lives. This is a radical change from the previous situation which saw sacred sites destroyed in order to build the original open

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pit mine at Argyle in the early 1980s.

These are big changes from the old ways, but they are changes that politicians and resource companies are accepting and some are embracing.

The overwhelming positive reaction to the Rudd Government's national apology to the stolen generations demonstrated how much support there is among the Australian population for changing the way Australia deals with Aboriginals.

An apology is a fundamental acknowledgement that an injustice occurred and that wrongs were committed. It is a crucial first step towards forging a positive

relationship between governments and Aboriginals, but more is needed.

Unless they have the right to make decisions about the development of their own land, Aboriginals will continue to be shut out of the resource boom that has brought so many benefits to the rest of the community. We will be forced into continued dependence on government welfare, low education standards and negligible employment levels.

There is no quick fix for the problems facing Aboriginals. But neither is our situation without hope.

In the Kimberley and in other regions traditional owners are already acting to build an economic future for themselves and their children. We are determined to control this future and so ensure that our culture and our connection to the land remains strong as we improve our economic conditions.

This week's Australian Petroleum Production and Exploration Association conference in Perth brings together a wide range of players involved in possible resource developments in the Kimberley.

I encourage them to look at the bigger picture of prosperity for the broad community, including Kimberley traditional owners. This prosperity goes beyond money and includes environmental, cultural, and social wealth.

We all have an opportunity to get the balance right.

**Wayne Bergmann is executive director of the Kimberley Land Council**