



# Northern Land Council

## Protocols for Media Behaviour on Aboriginal Lands

**The following is intended as a guide for journalists working on Aboriginal communities and land in the Top End of the Northern Territory.**

There are special issues that affect media representatives who choose to cover issues in these remote locations and it is important that the following information is kept in mind when accessing Aboriginal land.

Lodging permit applications, observing cultural sensitivities, overcoming language barriers and a general acceptance that community life is vastly different to urban life are some of the factors that need to be considered when dealing with Aboriginal people and communities. What journalists may view as normal practice in an urban environment, doesn't necessarily transfer to a remote environment.

While they may be located in remote regions, it is worth noting that Aboriginal communities are aware of how they are being portrayed in mainstream media. Newspapers, radio and television broadcasts do reach many regions, and as such, allow communities to monitor media reports.

- **Stick to the permit conditions**

Once on Aboriginal land it is necessary to stick to the conditions listed on your permit. Following these conditions not only ensures that you are acting within the legal boundaries of the Aboriginal Land Act 1980, but also ensures those living areas and areas of significance unknown to you remain safe from damage and destruction (be aware of restrictions placed on you or the region). If in doubt, or in need of further clarification, then contact a local governing body. This could either be the relevant NLC regional office or local government council. If you are unsure of just where it is within the region that you are supposed to be, ask someone. This will ensure that you are not placed in a situation whereby unintended incidents may occur, such as accidentally trespassing upon restricted areas or private residences.

- **On arrival**

Upon arrival it is good manners to visit the local council office or a person of prominence in the community to ensure that they are aware of your presence. Aboriginal people are largely accommodating and welcoming. Sharing cultural practices and traditions is not uncommon and is often regarded as an important aspect of greater education and reconciliation. However, it is important to remember that when approaching individuals or groups, you do so with a degree of respect and understanding. Ask permission should you wish to take a photograph, talk with them, or inspect an item or object.

- **Dealing with delays**

Be prepared in advance of your visit to an Aboriginal community that your itinerary may not proceed according to plan. The people you wish to interview may not be available for a



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variety of reasons, and there is nothing to be gained by allowing personal frustration to boil over into public displays of anger. For a visitor to behave in this manner on someone else's country is considered deeply offensive by Aboriginal people and could lead to the cancellation of your visit. Make sure you have sufficient flexibility in your travel schedule to adjust interview times or seek out other potential interviewees. Remember at all times that community life moves to a different rhythm than life in the cities and big towns, and that what is important to you as a journalist may not carry the same weight with community members.

- **Using a deceased person's name/image**

Many Top End Aboriginal people practice the tradition of not referring to a deceased person by name. It is important that this protocol is respected should you visit the community following the mourning period. Failure to comply with this request can be considered offensive. However, there are occasions when this practice does not apply. Upon arriving in a community it is best to check with the local council on the correct protocol to use should you find you need to refer to the deceased. Restrictions on the length of the mourning period can vary from region to region. Similarly, when considering the use of an image of a deceased individual or, in the case of an artist, an item created by them, seek permission prior to publishing/televising.

- **Language barriers**

For many Aboriginal people in the Northern Territory, English is often not their first language. When communicating, be patient, try to speak clearly and at times, slowly. Allow people time to respond before asking your next question. Having an interpreter is often a wise decision, as many people, particularly the elderly, prefer to talk in their native language. If you are not trained to converse using Kriol language, it's best not to try to do so as it may only lead to a confused conversation.

- **Right people, right topic**

In most Aboriginal communities certain people have the authority to talk about certain issues. Be aware that there are issues men can discuss, but women cannot, and vice versa. Make sure you are talking to the correct person should the conversation turn towards such matters as the identity of a certain tract of land or the significance of a story line related to the Dreaming.

- **Know your topic**

It is advisable to research ahead of arriving in an Aboriginal community. Remember living areas can, and do, contain a variety of language groups and therefore a range of cultural practices or stories. Wherever possible, establishing prior contact is advised. Know whom you need to talk to or take pictures of before you arrive. Communities such as Maningrida and Wadeye (Port Keats) are just two examples of merged communities. While they now share



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the same residential area, the population of these large communities come from more than 16 different traditional lands and hence have different stories, interests and responsibilities.

- **Honesty is the best policy**

Venturing onto an Aboriginal community under the guise of pursuing one story/project while actually pursuing another is not advisable, as there can be repercussions such as exclusion from future visits. It is Aboriginal land and Aboriginal homes you have been invited to visit and remain upon. Jeopardising this invitation by adopting deceptive tactics will work against an individual or organisation, and will make life harder for fellow participants in the media industry.

### **Overall**

Aboriginal people in the NLC's region have always been willing to share their culture with the global community and are not opposed to visits from outsiders.

They are aware that greater media interest and coverage can lead to understanding and recognition of traditional practices and law, and assist them to address some of the social and economic problems facing remote communities in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

If you are not unreasonably intrusive and represent community issues fairly, you are likely to be welcomed more warmly in succeeding visits.