



Northern Land Council

MEDIA RELEASE

Saluting Big Bill Neidjie, icon to his people

24 May 2002

It is with great sadness that the Northern Land Council today learnt of the death of Big Bill Neidjie, OAM, the legendary “Kakadu Man” and one of the outstanding leaders of the Northern Territory’s Land Rights movement. The legacy he leaves behind for all indigenous people in Australia cannot be overestimated.

Big Bill passed away peacefully, surrounded by family, at East Alligator at 7.55pm last night.

In expressing his condolences to Bill’s immediate and extended family, Northern Land Council Chairman Galarrwuy Yunupingu said that above all else Bill’s life contained a message of reconciliation for all Australians no matter what their creed or colour.

“Bill’s great humanity and constant endeavour to bridge for us all the cultural and historical divide between indigenous and non-indigenous Australians is the gift he leaves,” Mr Yunupingu said.

Big Bill was, as his name suggests, a larger-than-life figure who combined a career as an author and poet along with his role as a fighter for land rights in Arnhem Land’s Alligator Rivers region. Not only did he play an instrumental part in his Bunidj people’s victorious claim over their traditional lands but was also a central figure in the establishment of Kakadu National Park in 1979.

Bill was born at Alawanydajawany on the East Alligator River sometime in the early 1920s, learning the traditional ways of life before taking up work as a buffalo hunter on the Alligator River’s sub-coastal plains. A varied career followed, including time spent working in a timber mill, as a gardener in Darwin, as a deck hand on a coastal lugger servicing remote communities and – during the Second World War – at a radar station at Cape Don.

It was this knowledge of the wider world that his friends believe gave Bill a special wisdom. As a senior traditional Bunidj man Bill was conscious of the need to share his knowledge, culture and country with other Australians, helping set up the joint management arrangements between traditional owners and Parks Australia that has seen Kakadu National Park develop to international icon status.

Nor did he forget his responsibility to the wider Aboriginal community, supporting the Jawoyn people in their struggle against mining at Guratba (Coronation Hill) and appearing as a crucial witness during the 1990 inquiry into the mine proposal.

In Bill’s own words: “My spirit has gone back to my country ... my mother.”

