



Northern Land Council

MEDIA RELEASE

Defence signs landmark agreement

16 July 2003

The Department of Defence will move ahead with developing northern Australia's largest training facility on the 8,700 square kilometre Bradshaw pastoral lease near Timber Creek in the Northern Territory after securing an Indigenous Land Use Agreement with traditional owners.

In a partnership brokered by the Northern Land Council, traditional owners have granted Defence use of the former cattle station for an initial period of 75 years and consented to the construction of an all-weather road and bridge. In return Defence has agreed to protect sacred sites and guarantee access to Bradshaw by the area's 800 traditional owners in addition to undertaking a raft of financial, training and employment commitments.

Importantly, native title will not be extinguished by the defence purposes lease.

Traditional owners and senior NLC officers attended today's historic signing at the newly constructed \$9 million bridge across the Victoria River linking Bradshaw to the outside world, which was also officially opened by Federal Defence Minister Robert Hill.

Among those attending today's event were senior elders Alan Griffiths and Captain Waditj, who described the moment as a "landmark" for the Jamundjung, Nungali/Ngaliwurru, Murinkura, Murinpatha, and Wardaman people.

"Our country is more important to us than words can convey," Mr Griffiths said. "This agreement will allow us to set our own course, and will help keep our people strong."

Mr Waditj said Defence's agreement to a range of strategies aimed at maximising employment, training and business opportunities for traditional owners was "great news, particularly for our young people".

NLC Chief Executive Norman Fry said the agreement would serve as a beacon to Indigenous people across Australia.

"This is the first time the Commonwealth has entered into an agreement of this scale," Mr Fry said. "It sets an example of how traditional owners and government agencies can co-operate to reach a workable solution for all parties concerned."

"Defence and traditional owners have already developed a positive working relationship in dealing with cross-cultural issues which augurs well for the future of the agreement."

BRADSHAW STATION – A HISTORY

- There is much evidence of prolonged Aboriginal occupation and use of the land which now constitutes Bradshaw Station. An archaeological sites survey carried out in 1994-95 documented a diverse array of material including stone tool scatters, art sites, marked trees and burial sites.
- Early European seafarers, including Portuguese and Dutch explorers, are thought to have sailed along the Victoria-Fitzmaurice River coastline from the early 16th century onwards. It is also possible that voyagers from China, India and present-day Indonesia landed on this coastline, with the closest known evidence for Asian landfall being tamarind trees growing near Point Pearce just to the north.
- Official European knowledge of the Victoria River region and contact with local Aboriginal people began in 1839 with the expedition led by Captain John Wickham aboard HMS Beagle. Although Wickham himself fell ill during his visit to the region, his lieutenant, John Lort Stokes, led a foot patrol up the Victoria River.

Stokes recorded the first meeting between Europeans and local Aborigines in the form of two men whom he described as having “a fine manly bearing” with a “bold, fearless manner”. Stokes went on to say: “...the condition of the two who made themselves visible, indicated their residence in a country fitted to supply abundantly all natural wants.”

- Further expeditions by Augustus Gregory in 1855-56 and Alexander Forrest in 1879 established that the Victoria River hinterland was rich in grazing country, and the 1880s and 1890s witnessed a rush of pastoralists taking up leases in the area (Delamere, Wave Hill, Victoria River Downs, Ord River and Auvergne among them).
- Bradshaw Station came into being in 1894 when Captain Joe Bradshaw obtained a lease for 4,800 square miles. In 1898 the station property was augmented by a separate lease of 2,000 square miles to Joe’s brother Fred, with both leases run as one station.
- Documented Aboriginal resistance to the occupation of their lands continued through to 1932, although gradually Aboriginal people took up work on the stations as domestic workers and ringers. Bradshaw retained its Aboriginal workforce until 1978, when Aboriginal people walked off in a dispute over wages.
- In 1996 the Department of Defence bought the station lease with the intention of using it as a training area for the relocated 1st Brigade. In 1997 the NLC lodged a native title claim on behalf of traditional owners. Negotiations leading to the construction of the bridge across the Victoria River to Bradshaw were completed in 2001, and the final agreement regarding Bradshaw was completed in 2002 with execution in 2003.