



NORTHERN
LAND COUNCIL

MEDIA RELEASE

Our Land, Our Sea, Our Life

Traditional Owners celebrate the handback of Urapunga township and Old Elsey Homestead site

24 March 2022

On behalf of the Traditional Owners, the Northern Land Council welcomes the resolution of two land claims in the Roper River region of the Northern Territory.

The Minister for Indigenous Australians, the Honourable Ken Wyatt AM MP, joined Traditional Owners and their families earlier today at Mataranka Showgrounds to deliver the deeds of title to the Urapunga township (Lot 281) to the Urapunga Aboriginal Land Trust and the Old Elsey Homestead site (NT Portion 5604) to the Mangarrayi Aboriginal Land Trust (ALT).

Urapunga is a small community 320km south-east of Katherine and is on the traditional country of the Budal Yutpundji-Milwarapara group, who speak Ngalakan language.

Like many similar ‘townships’ established around this time, Urapunga was officially proclaimed in 1887 but land in the town remained unsold and the town struggled to thrive other than on paper.

Since the passage of the *Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act 1976* (the Land Rights Act) a number of parcels of land in the area have been recognised as Aboriginal land.

In 2001, the Budal Yutpundji-Milwarapara group were successful in their native title claim but technical issues concerning road tenure frustrated progression of the settlement until an Indigenous Land Use Agreement (ILUA) reflecting the native title determination over that land was finalised in 2005.

In 2019 the areas in the town of Urapunga subject to the ILUA were included in schedule one of the Land Rights Act following the passage of the *Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Amendment Bill 2018*.

Northern Land Council Chairman Samuel Bush-Blanasi said that the handback of land represented a bittersweet end to the long struggle fought by many generations of Traditional Owners.

“The old people for this country have handed down stories about terrible days in the Urapunga area and right along the Roper River country back in the 1870s and 1880s. Our mob didn’t

want pastoral development and there were many violent confrontations between our mob and the pastoralists and others who followed them,” said Mr Bush-Blanasi.

“Back in those days our people were shot at with rifles, they were hunted, but they and the many generations that followed them have survived. Today we honour the lives of the old people who kept our laws, our culture, our language and our lives strong.

“Here we are today at the Mataranka Showgrounds as guests of the Najig clansmen and women of the Yangman people, and we celebrate the fact that after all these years the traditional owners have their land back. I congratulate everyone here today on their achievements.”

Mr Bush-Blanasi also congratulated the Traditional Owners of the site of the Old Elsey Homestead, near Warloch Ponds south of Mataranka, on the long-overdue return of their country following the settlement of the Elsey Region Land Claim (No. 245).

That claim was lodged in 1997, but for reasons beyond the control of Aboriginal people it was not until 2019 that the land was recognised to be held in trust by the Mangarrayi ALT on behalf of the traditional owners, the Bobobingga clan of the Yangman people.

“There are a lot of stories around this place and many of them were told by the wrong people. Aboriginal people from here know the true stories about what happened on this country and all of the young people here today can be happy that those stories are the true stories,” Mr Bush-Blanasi said.

“It has been a long time coming but this ceremony today links up our ancestors with the current generations on this land. Although we are sad that the old people didn’t live to see this day, to see this land coming back to all the young ones here today, we are also really happy. Any day that any land is returned to its rightful Aboriginal owners is a very good day,” said Mr Bush-Blanasi.