

NLC GOES BACK TO ITS ROOTS

The Northern Land Council has gone 'back to the basics' – helping Aboriginal people acquire and manage their traditional lands and sea.

Following a turbulent couple of years, Australia's most influential Aboriginal organisation has steadied and started the job of becoming more responsive to its grassroots constituents than ever.

Marion Scrymgour went to remote communities after being appointed chief executive 18 months ago.

"I saw the poverty and hopelessness – it breaks your heart," she says. "This is what we should be concentrating on."

The former Labor Cabinet Minister is using all her political, diplomatic and negotiating skills to get traditional owners to have confidence in the land council again.

"My main aims are stability, reconnecting with communities and rebuilding confidence in the land council.

"The response from communities has been overwhelming."

Ms Scrymgour and her team are also working hard to rebuild relations with

the Federal and Territory governments.

This is paying off – the Federal Government increased its funding of the NLC this year for the first time in seven years.

The NLC, which is made up of seven regions and is governed by a 78-strong council, acted with speed and decisiveness when it became clear that the coronavirus was becoming a pandemic.

It shut down all communities in its jurisdiction to everyone except essential workers – moving quicker even than the Territory Government.

Larrakia Nation and Kalano Community Association worked tirelessly to assist thousands of Aboriginal people to leave urban centres, such as Darwin and Katherine, and return to their home community.

The NLC's message to Aboriginal people living in towns was: "Go home – you are safer on country than here".

WAGIMAN CHILDREN ENJOYING BEING ON COUNTRY AT THE ANNUAL WAGIMAN CULTURE CAMP. CREDIT KATHRINE CARVER

CEO MARION SCRYMGOUR.



WE ARE DELIGHTED THAT NOT A SINGLE ABORIGINAL PERSON IN THE TERRITORY HAS CONTRACTED THE VIRUS.

More than 2500 left Darwin alone.

Ms Scrymgour says there were many emotional reunions – some people returned to their homeland communities after living in the long-grass in Darwin for more than a decade.

Demand for food from community stores rocketed as the population swelled and the NLC formed a partnership with supermarket chain Coles to ensure adequate supplies.

The NLC contracted Tiwi actor Robbie Collins to appear in Covid-19 information films, which were then dubbed into 18 languages.

“Our response to the crisis was based on advice from health experts,” says Ms Scrymgour. “If coronavirus got into our communities, the results would be catastrophic.

“We are delighted that not a single Aboriginal person in the Territory has contracted the virus.”

PERMIT SYSTEM

Nearly everybody needs a permit to enter Aboriginal land – much as you would need permission to go onto a cattle station or other private land.

Aboriginal people are happy to have respectful, law-abiding visitors, but they want to know who’s where and when for everybody’s safety.

For instance, it is critical to ensure that visitors don’t enter sacred sites or other culturally significant places, and to know where everyone is during early dry season burns or the culling of feral animals.

A system ‘with a friendly face’ has been developed where permits can often be issued online within a few minutes.

The NLC is working with traditional owners to establish standards for visitors, including where people can go, what they can do and how long they can stay.

WAGIMAN RANGER JASMIN HUDDLESTON.



SIMONE ROSTRON, LARA DARCY AND GRESTINA WILSON (MANINGRIDA SENIOR SECONDARY LEARNING ON COUNTRY PARTICIPANTS).



ABORIGINAL RANGERS GET HANDS ON WITH THE LATEST TECHNOLOGIES AT THE INDIGENOUS RANGER FORUM 2019.



WESLEY SHIELDS AT THE INDIGENOUS RANGER FORUM 2019.



JOY CARDONA AND JAMIE DAMASO SHOW THE MALAK MALAK APP.

For instance, some coastal communities welcome fishermen, but insist they only use rods, stay no longer than five nights and take all their rubbish away with them.

Communities are particularly angered by hunters coming onto their land without permits.

“They are tired of people shooting up their land,” says Ms Scrymgour.

The NLC is now more aggressive in pursuing prosecutions and wants penalties increased, including the seizure of vehicles.

Traditional owners have told the NLC that they don’t ask much from visitors – just that they understand they are on Aboriginal-owned land and that they be as respectful as they would be on anyone else’s property.

REGIONALISATION STRATEGY

The land council’s decentralisation strategy is underway – offices

have been opened in Wadeye and Maningrida, bringing the number to 11 throughout the Top End.

There have always been local representatives, but the network of regional offices makes it easier and more efficient for communities to deal with the NLC.

Half of the NLC’s 280 staff are Aboriginal and the aim is to increase the percentage by upskilling staff.

HOUSING

A major focus for the land council going forward will be remote housing, leasing and land use opportunities.

“The NLC will be rigorously pursuing the improvement of remote housing in our communities and outstations,” says Ms Scrymgour.

RANGERS

Across the NLC region, the ranger

program continues to be an enormous success – with 36 individual Aboriginal ranger groups managing some of the most intact and culturally significant and biodiverse country in the country.

Not surprisingly, the rangers and their families are proud of their work and are seen as role models in their communities.

The work includes:

- Protection of cultural heritage and passing on of cultural knowledge to the next generation
- Land and coastal patrols, including cleaning beaches of rubbish and, quite often, removing massive ghost nets lost or discarded by local and international fishermen
- Weed control and fire management
- Ensuring visitors, such as anglers, are keeping to the rules
- Monitoring dolphins, dugongs and seagrass

OUR FUTURE IS OUR KIDS AND I WANT TO SEE THEM GET THE RIGHT EDUCATION AND GO ON TO LIVE HEALTHY LIVES AND CARE FOR THEIR FAMILIES - THE LEARNING ON COUNTRY PROGRAM HELPS CREATE THAT PATHWAY FOR THEM - SAMUEL BUSH-BLANASI

LEARNING ON COUNTRY PROGRAM COORDINATOR HARRY THORMAN WITH STUDENTS ON THE YIRRKALA LAYNHAPUY HOMELANDS.



The NLC works hard to ensure that ranger work opportunities are available for women and young people. All NLC hosted ranger groups now employ women, and more women are being trained to go into senior and leadership roles.

Rangers also engage with community schools - giving talks on their work and taking students on patrols - and junior ranger groups have been set up in some communities.

The ranger program has been so successful that the NLC has been offered additional opportunities to tender for fee-for-service work for external agency and industry partners.

The Federal Government has announced its intentions to extend funding for the existing ranger groups until 2028.

NLC chairman Samuel Bush-Blanasi says it's important to have even more countrymen and women working on country.

"Country is important to us, especially when we're talking about sacred sites from the sea to the land."

LEARNING ON COUNTRY

High school students are being reminded in interesting and fun ways that they have something of which to be enormously proud: the most ancient surviving culture in the world.

More than 1000 middle and senior school students from 15 remote schools are taking part in the Learning on Country program.

The program provides a 'both ways' approach to education - students participate in traditional learning and western scientific approaches to study, both on country and in the classroom, that are accredited towards

Vocational Education and Training (VET) and high school certificates.

Mr Bush-Blanasi said the program is producing culturally confident and educated young Aboriginal people.

"Our future is our kids and I want to see them get the right education and go on to live healthy lives and care for their families - the Learning on Country program helps create that pathway for them.

"The program is extremely inspiring because it gives our kids a better education - a both ways education. Developed by Aboriginal people for our young people, it teaches them skills that they need to survive in our culture and balanda culture."

The program is funded by the Federal Government's National Indigenous Australians Agency.

SAVING LANGUAGE

Traditional owners are working hard to save language.

For instance, only five people now speak fluent Malak Malak, the ancient language of a group of people in the Daly River region.

So Malak Malak traditional owners used some of their money from royalty payments for a project that recorded the native speakers and created a mobile phone app so Malak Malak people can learn their language and keep it going.

It's all part of the NLC's Community Planning and Development Program, which works alongside groups interested in putting some of their royalty money towards projects that provide them with lasting benefits.

The eight communities currently using the program have put aside

nearly \$8 million of their income to do community development and so far have 33 projects on the go.

Other projects include upgrading the Marralum outstation near the Western Australian border, partnering with the shire in Galiwin'ku to increase local employment opportunities at the Galiwin'ku recreation centre and respecting past elders with upgrades to the cemetery at Wadeye.

SAVING HISTORY

Former Australian Rules football umpire Joy Cardona is collating about 30,000 photographs, manuscripts and rare books going back 100 years to ensure the Territory history of Aboriginal people is preserved.

BLUE MUD BAY

The NLC is keen to work out an equitable agreement over the High Court's 2008 Blue Mud Bay decision, which acknowledged Aboriginal ownership of the land down to the low tide mark.

Ms Scrymgour wants the land council to sit down with all stakeholders, including traditional owners, the Tiwi and Anindilyakwa land councils, the Seafood Council and the Amateur Fishermen's Association.

She says "it will be business as usual" for commercial and recreational fishermen for the next two years while the agreement is being thrashed out.

The NLC wants an agreement that will benefit Aboriginal people and ensure the fisheries are sustainable.

"Any agreement going forward will need to be ratified and agreed to by the NLC's full council," says Ms Scrymgour.

TQ

BARUNGA SCHOOL STUDENT AND LEARNING ON COUNTRY PARTICIPANT IDENTIFYING PLANTS.

