

## **Aboriginal Apprenticeship Program at Alice Springs Desert Park.**

Ruth Brown, Assistant Curator (Botany), ASDP.

The Alice Springs Desert Park, in conjunction with Arrernte Council a local Aboriginal Council, has established a successful apprenticeship program for Aboriginal youth in Alice Springs. Apprenticeships are offered in horticulture, zookeeping and guiding. These apprenticeships provide the knowledge, skills attitudes and qualifications necessary for the applicants to compete successfully for permanent employment in mainstream industry.

In Central Australia, earlier schemes to train Aboriginals in horticulture and tour guiding have involved levels of training that do not equip the trainee with the skills or qualifications to either compete for employment in the mainstream job market or confidently manage horticultural or tour guide activities in remote communities. To address this, the ability to provide trade apprenticeships has been sought to create wider employment opportunities for Aboriginals in their chosen career.

The Aboriginal Apprenticeship Program was established at the Desert Park primarily to provide local Aboriginal youth with an opportunity to gain knowledge and skills that would lead to employment opportunities. At the same time they would also obtain a qualification from a recognised training organisation that would enable them to compete on an equal basis for jobs. Hopefully this could also be provided without the applicant having to move away from their family and their country, both very important aspects in Aboriginal culture.

Alice Springs has a population of about 27,000 people. Current statistics state that 25% of the total population are Aboriginal and 44% of the school-aged population are Aboriginal. Yet Alice Springs has a major problem with indigenous unemployment. The official unemployment rates in Alice Springs are 16.3% for the indigenous population and 2.9% for the non-indigenous population. This first figure increases to 34.9% if CDEP<sup>1</sup> participants are included. So with high indigenous unemployment rates and a large percentage of indigenous youth, it is important to try to address the unemployment problem before the next generation are faced with it.

The Desert Park is a major tourist and educational facility in Alice Springs. There are approximately 50 people employed at the Park. As such it is seen as a major employer in the town. Consequently we endeavour to tackle the indigenous unemployment problem by contributing in our own way, namely the apprenticeship program. If we can provide a few young Aboriginals with the opportunity to complete an apprenticeship and hopefully gain permanent employment, then the cycle of unemployment that often moves from one generation to the next may be broken.

Indigenous culture is not just an add-on at the Desert Park, it is part of the fabric of the Park itself.

- All employees are required to complete cross-cultural awareness and anti-discrimination training.
- Staff are encouraged to participate in Arrernte language courses.

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<sup>1</sup> Community Development Employment Program – a work for the dole type program

- Arrernte language is included where possible on all plant and animal identification signs.
- Traditional owners are involved in all major decisions about the Park.
- Traditional owners and other Aboriginal leaders are consulted on Aboriginal culture talks.
- 4 of the 7 full-time guide positions at the Desert Park are designated for Aboriginal people.

#### Developing the Requirements of the Apprenticeship Program.

To develop a successful Aboriginal Apprenticeship Program across the organisation, the Desert Park established a few basic requirements that it believed would need to be fulfilled. Firstly, the Desert Park wanted to offer apprenticeships in a wide variety of fields to attract a variety of people with a variety of skills and ambitions. Three out of five units at the Desert Park were large enough to run an apprenticeship program (namely guides, botany and zoology). Secondly, the training provided needed to be comprehensive enough to allow the apprentice to compete on the job market. The minimum requirements to achieve this were certificate 2 in tour guiding including 1 year on the job training, certificate 3 in horticulture including 3 years on the job training or certificate 3 in zookeeping including 3 years on the job training. Thirdly as the Desert Park is considered a major employer in Alice Springs and therefore a major training provider, we only wanted to run the number of apprenticeships as there would be permanent positions in the industry locally. Thus giving each apprentice a reasonable expectation of obtaining full time employment once finished. Finally peer support was crucial and local Aboriginal culture dictates gender relationships are very important. We always try to have a minimum of two apprentices in each work unit and where possible have two males or two females. If this is not possible, we ensure the apprentices are working with the appropriate gender at least in the initial stages of the apprenticeship.

#### Funding the Apprenticeship Program.

By the late 1990's, the Alice Springs Desert Park only had provisions in the budget to employ one Aboriginal apprentice so consequently could not meet the requirements established by the Desert Park for the apprenticeship program. The positions therefore needed to be funded externally. A number of sources of funding were explored including ABSTUDY, CDEP etc. After numerous attempts to get funding for the program, the best solution was to form an agreement between the Desert Park and Arrernte Council in Alice Springs. Arrernte Council were already involved in CDEP programs and apprenticeships in larger industries such as the construction and mechanical industries and were looking to develop their training programs in new fields. The two organisations have developed a memorandum of understanding in which Arrernte Council employs the apprentices for 46 weeks of the year, paying all the salary costs using a combination of STEP<sup>2</sup> and CDEP funding. The Desert Park pays the remaining 6 weeks of salary costs, provides all equipment, materials and on the job training and acts as host employer for the entire year.

In 2001 three horticultural apprentices and four guide apprentices started on the program. Of the horticultural apprentices, one apprentice had already completed Certificate 2 in horticulture and realised he needed certificate 3 to be competitive in

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<sup>2</sup> Structured Training and Employment Program

the job market. Of the other two, one was completing Year 10 and the other was in her early 20's and had been unemployed since leaving school. The four guide apprentices had completed varying levels of schooling (at least Year 10) and were looking for full time employment. In 2002 two zookeeping apprentices started on the program as well. All apprentices completed at least two weeks volunteer work at the Desert Park working in the units before signing up for the program to ensure both parties worked well together and that the future apprentices felt comfortable in their choice of field. Once they have commenced on the program, the apprentices are employed on a three month probation period (as is the case for any new staff member) and are treated as any other member of staff with the same work conditions. Throughout their placement at the Desert Park, Arrernte Council provides continual support for the apprentices through the employment of field officers, in particular the program coordinator Tony Linn. Tony visits the apprentices at the workplace on a regular basis, organises tutoring or assistance with their studies if required and provides support for the apprentice in a variety of ways.

#### Successes of the Apprenticeship Program:

- Apprentice guides often obtained a designated position in the guide unit at the Desert Park and have, in some cases, used those guide positions as an entry point for ranger and land management positions within the Parks and Wildlife Commission of the Northern Territory.
- Aboriginal apprentices became role models for local youth demonstrating the employment opportunities available to them.
- Senior Aboriginal staff at the Desert Park and Arrernte Council, provide an informal mentoring support network for the younger Aboriginal staff. This is usually more culturally appropriate.
- The Desert Park's ability to work effectively with its traditional owners and local Aboriginal people has been enhanced with the apprenticeship program. The ability to key into another knowledge framework more easily has arisen, due to the knowledge, skills and contacts indigenous staff bring with them.
- The program has provided positive employment opportunities for a group of people that have a much lower rate of employment than other groups in Alice Springs.
- Staff development for all employees, by creating a multicultural work environment where diversity is valued and learning opportunities are enhanced. It is a sharing environment where tertiary trained staff share their knowledge of western scientific perspectives and the Aboriginal staff share their knowledge of desert people's traditional and contemporary life. All staff in the three sections of the Desert Park are responsible for organising the work programs and delivering training for the apprentices. It is possible to build confidence, self-esteem and work ethics (especially where this concept is new) through creating a safe, open and nurturing environment where people know what is expected and feel comfortable to be themselves, develop their skills and contribute to the team.
- Helping young local Aboriginal people realise that they have a lot to offer the tourism industry. For example the experiences they have had growing up in Alice Springs and the things they have learned from their old people out bush; hunting, collecting and making implements, language skills – these are the very experiences that tourists are interested in from the local Aboriginal people themselves.

### Challenges of the Apprenticeship Program

- The number of applicants for the positions initially was very small.
- The retention rate, although good compared to other Aboriginal training programs, was causing some disruptions as not all apprentices stayed with the program.
- As with all on-the-job training, it can be very time consuming and energy intensive for staff. The initial partial loss of a full time staff member to train an apprentice is unavoidable. However this is very quickly nullified when the apprentice is sharing the workload. A number of senior staff at the Desert Park spend time each week on formal training sessions with the apprentices on an individual basis. Young people who are entering the workforce for the first time can be very energy intensive. Quite often they require a very organised daily work program as self-motivation and work ethics are something that many young people have to learn and this takes time.
- The involvement of another employer body (Arrernte Council) with a different suite of rules to the NT government is an uncommon situation that can create unusual challenges.
- Managers need to have knowledge of the demands, obligations and challenges that exist for people who live and work within two cultures and be able to help staff move between Western and Aboriginal cultural demands. There are many external pressures placed on apprentices (particularly female apprentices) from outside the workplace due to family constraints. Management styles need to be flexible and diverse. Managers need to be able to create a supportive workplace and assist apprentices who may face pressures and criticism from their unemployed peers in the community. This may include counselling staff when faced with racial and inter-racial prejudices.
- Managers need to have an understanding of cultural obligations and how employment conditions can be adapted to meet the needs of Aboriginal people.

### Results:

- Since 2001 three out of four Park Guide apprentices successfully completed the full apprenticeship (Certificate 2 in tour guiding and on the job training). The fourth completed Certificate 2 in tour guiding.
- Of the three who completed full apprenticeships, one gained full time employment as a Park Guide at the Desert Park, one gained full time employment at Uluru National Park and the third is working full time in Alice Springs after completing some temporary work at the Desert Park.
- Two more Park guide apprentices started this year.
- One horticultural apprentice is about to enter third year. One joined the program with a certificate 2 and successfully completed certificate 3 in horticulture and on the job training. He chose to move to Adelaide and was looking for work. The third horticultural apprentice did not complete the apprenticeship due to family constraints.
- Two more horticultural apprentices joined the program this year.
- Two zookeeping apprentices joined the program in 2002. They are currently completing certificate 3 in zookeeping externally through Box Hill TAFE in Victoria. These are the only two zookeeping apprentices in Australia.
- The Desert Park has increased its percentage of indigenous staff from 10% in 1996 to 22% in 2003.

- In October 2002 the Desert Park received one of the NT Public Service Awards for Equity and Diversity in the Workplace for the Desert Park's Aboriginal Apprenticeship program.

#### Future Directions for the Apprenticeship Program

As part of the horticultural apprenticeships, the Desert Park endeavours to send their third year apprentice out of Alice Springs to attend a conference, work experience or training workshop. This gives the Aboriginal apprentice a broader view of what the industry offers to a trained horticulturist. It expands their horizons past Central Australia and also provides another incentive to finish their course. In 2002 the third year horticultural apprentice attended the International Plant Propagators Society conference in Melbourne. This was achieved with the assistance of the Victorian Nursery Industry Association and the generous support of some of its members.

An important part of the park's apprenticeship program is that it should be able to deliver results in terms of employment for successful participants. Potential employers in the horticultural field in Alice Springs include the Alice Springs Desert Park, Tangentyere Indigenous Landscapes, Olive Pink Botanic Gardens, Alice Springs Town Council, Aboriginal Councils, local commercial nurseries, Alice Springs Golf Course and landscape contractors. Local mining companies also have a need for trained seed collectors and staff for site rehabilitation. Potential employers in the guiding field include the Alice Springs Desert Park, the Aboriginal Arts and Cultural Centre and numerous tour companies operating in Alice Springs and Central Australia. When the apprentices have finished, they will have suitable qualifications and skills to also seek employment elsewhere in Australia.

A future direction of the Desert Park Aboriginal Apprenticeship Program could be the provision of internships. These would be available for both indigenous and non-indigenous students and would provide them with the opportunity to expand their knowledge of arid zone horticulture, zoo-keeping or guiding. The internships could take the form of projects that are proposed by the student in conjunction with the Desert Park. These could include for example, developing a bush foods garden, conducting a propagation trial or looking at the use of local plants in the rehabilitation of natural vegetation. The internships could be run in conjunction with industry, providing opportunities for the intern to work for part of their time with the company concerned. The company could also assist by improving the apprentices' opportunities for employment within their industry.

Whatever future direction the program takes, it will undoubtedly get easier as resources are developed over time (for example a dedicated study area is desperately needed, especially for apprentices studying externally). Full time staff will become more experienced at working with apprentices and solving the problems that occur in managing the program will become second nature. Time and practice is all we need to improve what we are already doing. The Desert Park is a relatively racist free organisation and all staff are very supportive of the program and want it to work. Department managers at the Desert Park have a lot of freedom to try new things – if it doesn't work you don't do it again, if it does work you develop the concept into something bigger and better. This forward/open thinking contributes greatly to the success of the program.

The program is being used as an example of best practice indigenous training and employment throughout the NT government and the Northern Territory. It provides the role model for other similar schemes throughout the Northern Territory and Australia.

**The program works because of the people - the effort staff at all levels, particularly staff working with the apprentices, put into the program and the apprentices who want to achieve something with their lives and be a role model for other young Aboriginal people in Central Australia.**

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References:

Indigenous Employment and Training at the Alice Springs Desert Park by G. Phelps and T. Linn. A paper given at the 2003 ARAZPA conference in Adelaide.

For my own information.

July 2001 – present **Guide Apprentices**

Hugh Woodbury - now a T1 Guide at ASDP, studying Cert III Lands, Parks & Wildlife and keen to move into Ranger ranks in a few years

Sascha Bray - Apprentice pastry chef

Sheena Turner - mum - but very keen to return to ASDP when her child grows up

Luke Guisepppe - Apprentice Ranger at Uluru KT National Park

Kalem Ronberg – first year apprentice

Amunda Gorey – first year apprentice

October 2000 – present **Horticultural Apprentices**

Bryan Manning – completed certificate 3 in horticulture and looking for work in Adelaide.

Peter Farrer – just entered his third year of apprenticeship.

Kellie-Ann Gorey – did not complete the apprenticeship due to family constraints.

Greg Louis – first year apprentice

Geoff Taylor – first year apprentice

August 2002 – present **Zookeeping Apprentices**

Mary-ann Fischer – second year apprentice

Babette Griffin – did not complete the apprenticeship due to family constraints.

1996 ASDP Guide Apprentices (not part of the Arrernte Council program)

Garth Forrester

Caroline Miller

Melissa Liddle

+ another