

Indigenous Employment and Training at the Alice Springs Desert Park

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Abstract

The Alice Springs Desert Park has established a successful training and employment program for local Aboriginal people. The program includes apprenticeships in horticulture, zookeeping and guiding run jointly with a local Aboriginal Council, designated Aboriginal Park Guide positions and the development of support and career development mechanisms for indigenous employees.

The program has been highly successful with significant long-term employment outcomes being derived, as well as the Desert Park serving as an entry point into careers in land management for local Aboriginal people. Since initiating the program the Park has increased the percentage of Aboriginal staff from less than 10% to 22%. The program has helped to develop relationships between the Desert Park and the local Aboriginal community and also attracted considerable positive interest from Government and private sector.

This paper will describe the program including detailing the unique joint program with Arrernte Council. The paper will outline external funding sources that the Park has been able to access to help to run the program.

The paper will outline the social justice, reconciliation, economic and conservation reasons that underpinned the Desert Park's decision to develop an indigenous training and employment program and will also propose that all zoos and botanic gardens have significant opportunities to play a role in addressing indigenous disadvantage in employment.

Unemployment of Aboriginal People in Alice Springs

Indigenous unemployment and underemployment are major problems in Alice Springs and in many other parts of Australia. The official indigenous unemployment rate in Alice Springs is approximately 16.3% (compared to 2.9% in the non-indigenous population) and if CDEP^① participants are included, the real rate of indigenous unemployment rises to 34.9%. Further, the labour force participation rate^② (including CDEP as unemployed) is only 28.4% in the indigenous population compared to 75.6% in the non-indigenous population.

^① Community Development Employment Program – a work for the dole type program

^② The labour force participation rate is the percentage of people 15 years and over not in full-time study who are employed.

Much of this unemployment is long-term, chronic and often intergenerational. It can be argued that this major chronic unemployment problem is the fundamental cause of many of the problems commonly associated with Aboriginal people in the Northern Territory (eg. health problems, substance abuse, violence, poor school retention rates, high crime and incarceration rates and anti-social behaviour problems). This is supported by the fact that many of the same problems are seen elsewhere in Australia in non-Aboriginal communities with high levels of chronic and intergenerational unemployment.

Currently 25% of the Alice Springs population is Aboriginal but in the school aged population 44% are Aboriginal and so there is a pressing need to address Aboriginal unemployment before the problems become even worse.

The Alice Springs Desert Park employs approximately 50 people making it a significant employer in a town of 25,000 people. The Park, therefore, has the opportunity to make a small but significant contribution to the employment of local Aboriginal people.

Aboriginal Employment at the Desert Park 1996-2000

To encourage local Aboriginal people to apply for positions at the Alice Springs Desert Park, the Park took a number of steps.

Senior management of the Park actively and strongly supported Aboriginal employment at the Park. Cross-cultural and anti-discrimination training was made compulsory for all employees at the Desert Park and Arrernte language courses were strongly encouraged to ensure that all employees within the organisation understood the reasons for promoting Aboriginal employment and gave their support to the program.

4 of the 7 full-time Park Guide positions at the Alice Springs Desert Park were designated for local Aboriginal people.[®] These positions ensured that interpretation of Aboriginal use and management of the desert environment would be largely delivered by local Aboriginal people who could share this information from their own cultural perspective.

The Park also continued its close relationship with the Traditional Owners of the Park site and other senior Aboriginal people in Alice Springs.

For the first 5 years of the Park's operations, these efforts met with mixed success.

Positive outcomes included:

- 4 local Aboriginal people completed a Park Guide Apprenticeship Program in 1996 and 3 then gained positions in the Guide Unit
- The Park was able to keep the designated Park Guide positions filled at all times, although the number of applicants was often very small
- Every Aboriginal person who left the Guide Unit, left to take up other full-time employment or to do full-time home duties (many had been long-term unemployed prior to working at the Desert Park).

[®] Approval was required from the Anti-discrimination Commissioner of the NT to allow these positions to be restricted to local Aboriginal people.

- Designated Park Guide positions became an entry point into Park Ranger and Land Management positions within the Parks and Wildlife Commission of the NT (PWCNT).
- Aboriginal Park Guides became role models for local young Aboriginal people demonstrating the opportunities for employment either at the Desert Park or through the Park into the PWCNT.
- One of the Park Guides who progressed on to a Park Ranger position won a NT Young Australian of the Year Award in the Environment section.
- The Park's work environment and learning opportunities were enhanced by the increased diversity in the team.
- Those Aboriginal people working at the Park and those who had progressed through to other PWCNT positions provided an excellent network and an informal mentoring support team for new Aboriginal staff joining the Park. The presence of senior Aboriginal people in the Park team has been particularly successful in this regard as their mentoring is more culturally appropriate.
- The Park's ability to work effectively with its Traditional Owners and the local Aboriginal people was enhanced.
- The Park's non-Aboriginal staff demonstrated high level abilities to support Aboriginal staff where necessary.

However, the program was less successful than was desired for the following reasons:

- The number of applicants for designated Guide positions was often very small.
- There were no Aboriginal applicants for positions in the Zoology, Maintenance or Administration Units.
- Only one local Aboriginal person had been employed in the Botany Unit and none of the limited number of other local Aboriginal applicants for positions in that unit were adequately qualified (ie. having a Certificate III in Horticulture or higher).
- After 1996, the Park had only enough funding to run one Aboriginal Park Guide apprenticeship and no candidate had successfully completed it.

It became clear therefore that the major barrier to the employment of Aboriginal people at the Desert Park was the lack of suitably qualified local Aboriginal people available to compete successfully for entry level positions at the Park. Consequently, it was decided that, if the Park was to be a significant employer of local Aboriginal people it would need to provide apprentice level training for those people.

Baseline Criteria for Aboriginal Apprenticeships at the Desert Park

Analysis of the Desert Park's successes and failures in Aboriginal employment lead the Park to establish some base-line criteria that it believed would maximise the potential for success. In establishing these criteria, the Park also consulted widely with local Aboriginal organisations and a wide variety of people in the NT and Commonwealth Public Service with experience in Aboriginal employment programs. Unfortunately there were many opportunities to learn from others' mistakes as well as our own, however this experience and knowledge was critical in formulating our own Apprenticeship Program.

Wide Range of Career Opportunities

We determined that we wanted to make as many areas of the Park available for local Aboriginal employment as possible to allow us to attract a variety of people with a wide range of career aspirations. Unfortunately neither our Maintenance or Administration Units were large enough to run apprenticeships, however the Guide, Zoology and Botany Units were all capable of running apprenticeships.

Real Training for Real Jobs

An enormous amount of money has been spent throughout Australia on training programs for Aboriginal people often with little or no employment outcomes either because there were no jobs for the apprentices to move into after their training or because the training provided was inadequate to allow the apprentices to compete in the open job market with non-indigenous people with higher level training.

The experience of the Desert Park's Botany Unit, for example, clearly showed that whilst quite a few local Aboriginal people had training and certificates in horticulture, only one local Aboriginal applicant in 5 years had the minimum level qualification necessary for employment at the Desert Park.

The level of training for the respective disciplines at the Desert Park which would allow apprentices to compete successfully for permanent positions was determined to be:

- Park Guide - 1 year on the job plus a Certificate II in Tour Guiding
- Horticulturist - 3 years on the job plus a Certificate III in Horticulture
- Zookeeper – 3 years on the job plus a Certificate III in Zookeeping

We also determined that we would only run as many apprenticeships as we believed there would be permanent positions in the local industry. Our aim was to ensure that each apprentice should have a reasonable expectation of obtaining full-time permanent employment in their field within 3 months of the completion of their apprenticeship.

Adequate and Culturally Appropriate Peer Support

Experience had shown us that placing a single Aboriginal apprentice in the work place was not likely to be successful. Further, local Aboriginal culture dictates that gender relationships are very important. We therefore determined to ensure that we had at least two apprentices in each Unit and that, where possible, there would be at least two females or at least two males.

Funding for Aboriginal Apprenticeships at the Desert Park

The Desert Park had no budget provision for more than one apprenticeship and this was inadequate to meet our baseline criteria. It was therefore necessary for the Park to seek external funding to run the program.

The potential funding sources which the Park explored included:

- ABSTUDY administered by the Commonwealth Department of Education, Science and Technology <http://www.dest.gov.au/schools/guidelines/abstudy/2001/part1/1-3.htm>
- CDEP (Community Development Employment Projects) administered by ATSIC <http://www.atsic.gov.au/programs/economic/cdep/default.asp>

- IEP (Indigenous Employment Policy) funding programs administered by the Commonwealth Department of Employment and Work Relations which includes STEP (Structured Training and Employment Program)
http://www.dewr.gov.au/publications/budget/2000/factsheets/indigenous_employment.asp
- Private sector partnerships
- NT Public Service Apprenticeships and Cadetships

Eventually, after several years of investigation, the Alice Springs Desert Park was approached by Arrernte Council, a local Aboriginal Community Organisation, to explore the possibility of running the apprenticeships as a joint program between the Park and the Council. Under the terms of the Memorandum of Understanding that was developed between PWCNT/ASDP and the Arrernte Council, the Council pays all of the personnel costs for each apprentice for 46 weeks of the year using a combination of CDEP and STEP funding and the Park pays the remaining 6 weeks of personnel costs each year and all operational costs.

This arrangement was only possible because the Department of Employment and Work Relations agreed to extend STEP funding for this apprenticeship program from 1 day per week to 3 days per week and to make provision for it to operate over 3 years instead of the usual one.

CDEP is effectively a form of “work for the dole” and at the time of commencing the apprenticeships, it was unusual for CDEP to be used to place participants in mainstream workplaces outside of the community or community-based enterprises. However, this is changing where opportunities arise for CDEP participants to take up apprenticeships or other work-based training with mainstream industry which will ultimately lead to them moving off CDEP by obtaining full-time employment. The apprenticeship program would not have been possible if Arrernte Council had not been willing to take this more innovative approach to CDEP.

Joint Alice Springs Desert Park/Arrernte Council Apprenticeships 2001-2003

Advantages of the Partnership

The partnership between Arrernte Council and the Alice Springs Desert Park has been highly successful and extends well beyond the financial contributions that each make.

The Desert Park has provided the workplace, a structured on-the-job training program and highly skilled supervisors to ensure that the training at the Park is to the highest possible standards. Further, the Park has very good internal mentoring support through the presence of full-time permanent Aboriginal staff who provide leadership, guidance and support to the apprentices.

Arrernte Council has provided significant assistance in sourcing suitable potential apprentices and throughout the selection process to ensure that only those with the highest possible likelihood of completion of the apprenticeships are taken on. Arrernte Council, as an Aboriginal community organisation, has also been able to assist the apprentices with accommodation, transport and financial management. They have also been able to provide culturally appropriate advice, guidance and support to the apprentices and, where necessary, have been able to enlist the support of the apprentices’ families.

Outcomes to Date

Although the joint Apprenticeship Program is only in its early stages, it has thus far been a great success and has already achieved the following positive outcomes:

- 3 of the 4 apprentices who commenced the Park Guide apprenticeship successfully completed both the Certificate II in Tour Guiding and the on-the-job component. The fourth completed the Certificate II in Tour Guiding.
- Of the three who successfully completed the full Park Guide apprenticeship, one has gained permanent full-time employment as a Park Guide at the Desert Park, one is working full-time at Uluru-Kata Tjuta National Park and the third gained full-time employment in Alice Springs after some temporary work at the Desert Park.
- Two more Tour Guide apprentices will commence in 2003.
- One of the horticultural apprentices, who came to the Park with a Certificate II in Horticulture, successfully completed both his Certificate III in Horticulture and his on-the-job training and is currently seeking work in construction horticulture in Alice Springs.
- A second horticulture apprentice is in his first year.
- Two zookeeping apprentices commenced their three year apprenticeship in 2002 and are doing a Certificate III in Zookeeping. These are the only two zookeeping apprentices in Australia.
- The retention and completion rates of apprentices are very high compared with other Aboriginal training programs.
- The Desert Park has increased the percentage of its staff who are Aboriginal from 10% to over 20% (up to 25% when all apprentices are on board) and this is approaching the local demographics for Alice Springs.

Career Opportunities for Permanent Aboriginal Employees

Although the Desert Park has 4 permanent positions in its Guide Unit that are designated for local Aboriginal people so that the Park can access the special skills and knowledge of those people, the Park has elected not to create separate career streams for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal employees. Once employed in permanent positions at the Park, Aboriginal staff are given the same opportunities as non-Aboriginal staff in terms of training support, opportunities for temporary transfer to other units and opportunities to take on higher duties and advancement for all employees is by competitive selection on merit.

The Desert Park has, however, found that as it increases the percentage of its staff who are Aboriginal and gains more experience employing Aboriginal people, it is learning how to better manage a multicultural workplace, how to better deal with Aboriginal cultural issues and how to provide a workplace that supports the career aspirations of Aboriginal people. As a consequence it is beginning to be seen as an employer of choice by young local Aboriginal people and the targeted Aboriginal apprenticeships are seen as an opportunity to gain the skills and experience to successfully compete for entry level positions at the Desert Park on merit.

Although not initially a planned outcome, a significant effect of the Desert Park's Aboriginal Apprenticeship and Employment Program has been to provide a pathway for local Aboriginal people to take on careers in land management.

There is a strong desire amongst many Aboriginal people to work on their country and to care for their country and working as a Park Ranger is seen as a very good way of achieving this goal. Unfortunately, local Aboriginal people from Alice Springs generally do not have and are unlikely to have the opportunity to acquire the undergraduate qualifications that non-Aboriginal applicants for entry level Park Ranger positions have and so they find it very difficult to win those positions.

By working at the Desert Park, local Aboriginal people can gain skills, knowledge and experience that is directly applicable to other land management positions. Furthermore, because the Desert Park is a part of the PWCNT, it is possible to offer employees with potential and interest short-term transfers to work as Park Rangers in the local National Parks which allows them to gain even more experience. In time, these people build up enough knowledge and experience to win permanent Park Ranger/Land Management positions with PWCNT on merit. Thus far, 5 Desert Park Guides have followed this path and young local Aboriginal people now recognise this as a way in which they can achieve their career goal of being a Park Ranger.

Benefits of an Indigenous Employment and Training Program

A More Diverse Workplace

Increasing the cultural diversity at the Desert Park has increased the Park's problem solving abilities and provided many more learning opportunities. It has particularly, but not only, enhanced the Park's ability to work effectively with the local Aboriginal community.

Aboriginal staff have brought new knowledge, skills and view points to the workplace from which other staff have been able to learn. Their cultural and environmental knowledge of the Australian deserts has of course been extremely valuable to the Desert Park.

Engagement with Our Local Community

The Alice Springs Desert Park is an important part of the Alice Springs community as an economic driver of tourism, a conservation institution and a community resource. By having a successful Indigenous Employment and Training Program, the Park is able to more fully engage with its local community by being an employer of all sections of the community not just of the majority non-Aboriginal section.

Social Justice and Reconciliation

The long history of indigenous disadvantage in our country and the problems that arise from that are well know and the relative inequality between indigenous Australians and non-indigenous Australians needs to be reduced if we are serious about meaningful reconciliation and living in a just society. This task is massive and although it will always depend heavily on the actions of our Governments, we contend that an enormous amount can be achieved through many, many localised small actions.

By taking a proactive role in providing training and employment for local Aboriginal people, the Desert Park is able to make a small but direct contribution to promoting social justice and reconciliation in its local community.

The presence of significant numbers of Aboriginal people on the staff at the Desert Park also has a positive impact towards reconciliation by providing visitors to Central Australia with the opportunity to meet local Aboriginal people who challenge the negative stereotypes of Aboriginal people that visitors often bring with them.

Economic Benefits

Social justice programs are often criticised by economic rationalists as inappropriate or at least an extravagance however it also can be argued that the employment of local Aboriginal people results in direct and indirect economic benefits for the Desert Park and for the community.

Direct economic returns include the salaries earned by the Aboriginal employees and the increased income that the Park derives by providing an indigenous tourism product.

Indirect economic returns to the community come from Aboriginal people moving from welfare dependency to permanent employment. Not only does the community no longer have to pay the unemployment benefits to the individual, but because the individual then earns a higher income for the rest of his or her working life, the individual then makes a direct contribution back to the community through the payment of higher income and indirect taxes. Furthermore, once the cycle of chronic and intergenerational unemployment is broken, the health, crime, incarceration and substance abuse problems are reduced as are the associated costs to the community.

Sharing in the Returns from Wildlife Tourism

The world is littered with examples of indigenous people shut out from the economic returns of wildlife tourism. It is well recognised now that this situation must change if conservation of the wildlife resource is to be sustainable. Employment at the Alice Springs Desert Park is one local opportunity for Aboriginal people to derive direct economic returns from wildlife tourism.

Conservation through Education

As zoos and botanic gardens move towards becoming bioparks, interpretation in those institutions will continue to move from animal or plant-centred through explaining the place of animals or plants in their environment to a fully integrated whole of the environment interpretation. Ultimately, once all elements of the environment, biotic and abiotic, human and non-human, are displayed and interpreted in their inter-related and interdependent complexities, the full conservation education potential of the biopark ideal can be achieved.

As a biopark, the Desert Park therefore recognises that the presentation of the human stories, both indigenous and non-indigenous, of the Australian desert environment must be an integrated and essential element of its environmental interpretation if the Park is to reach its maximum potential as a conservation education institution.

Conservation Outside of the Gates of the Desert Park

Conservation has been described as a luxury of the wealthy and where communities wrestle with immediate and devastating issues such as poverty, the social and health effects of poverty, the effects of dislocation from mainstream western economic society and, in some cases, the absence of hope for a better future, the time, energy and interest that they are likely to have to devote to conservation issues is likely to be minimal.

This is not just a third world issue. In the Northern Territory, where Aboriginal people are severely disadvantaged compared to non-indigenous people as measured by virtually every social, health and economic criteria, they own nearly 50% of the Northern Territory and in many cases, their land also has some of the highest conservation values (eg. bilbies in the NT are only found on Aboriginal land). Although the efforts of many Aboriginal people in actively leading or assisting with conservation programs in their country puts many affluent non-indigenous Australians to shame much more could be done if those communities did not also have to address the pressing and immediate issues of poverty and social dislocation.

The employment of indigenous people by zoos, botanic gardens and bioparks can therefore help local communities to move from poverty to financial self-sufficiency and to then to have the “luxury” of being able to focus even more on conservation issues in their country.

Furthermore, the sequelae of poverty and social dislocation cause Territory and Federal Governments to focus significant expenditure on ameliorating those problems. If the root causes were better addressed by decreasing the level of unemployment, governments may be able to direct more funding to conservation.

Effective land management for conservation both on and off National Parks is enhanced by the involvement of local indigenous people and the Indigenous Employment and Training Program at the Desert Park allows local Aboriginal people to progress to Park Ranger or other Land Management positions, often on their own land, which they would otherwise not have the opportunity to undertake.

Building Healthy Human Communities as Part of Healthy Ecosystems

Conservation is the process of maintaining or re-establishing healthy and sustainable ecosystems. Unfortunately, too often, the wildlife conservation industry tends to promote the concept of idealistic wilderness environments devoid of humans. This of course is not the case anywhere on earth and with the exception of Antarctica and some other extreme environments has never been the case in historic times.

The Desert Park believes that if our conservation efforts in the Australian deserts are to result in healthy ecosystems that are truly sustainable in the long-term then the human communities that are part of and have so much impact on that environment must also be healthy in every sense of the word.

In healthy human communities:

- social and economic inequalities are minimised,
- all members of the community have equal access to resources and opportunities and those resources and opportunities are adequate to meet the needs of the community members, and,

- all members of the community have the opportunity for meaningful engagement with the political process.

By implementing an Indigenous Employment and Training Program, the Desert Park has been able to begin to make a contribution towards improving the health of its own local community and therefore to make an important contribution to conservation of its local environment.