

Aboriginal Employment at the Alice Springs Desert Park

The Alice Springs Desert Park has had a very successful Indigenous Employment program since 1996. 22% of our staff are local Aboriginal people and we regularly contract Traditional Owners and other local elders as consultants for advice, guidance, permission and training.

We have built positive relationships with our Traditional Owners and other local Aboriginal people over the past nine years and have developed a reputation within the local Aboriginal community as a meaningful employer.

It has been in the Park's best interest to make our Indigenous Employment Program work. Having local Aboriginal employees enriches us as individuals, as storytellers and as an organisation. The success of the program has built self esteem within individuals which has had a flow on effect to their families and our community.

Leading a cross-cultural work team is very challenging & rewarding. Flexibility, trust and open and honest communication are fundamental to success. Following is a snapshot of what we do and how we do it. We are all learning together.

Designated positions

Approval from the Anti-discrimination Commissioner of the NT was required to allow the following positions to be restricted to local Aboriginal people:

- . 3 full time Technical 1 (T1) Guide positions
- . 1 full time Technical 2 (T2) Specialist Guide (Cross Cultural)
- . 2 (12 month) Apprentice Park Guide positions
- . 2 (3 year) Apprentice Horticulture positions
- . 2 (3 year) Apprentice Zoo Keeper positions

We have found that apprenticeships are more likely to be successful if they are taken on in groups so that individuals have peer support.

Recruitment

It takes a great deal of confidence to apply for a job. We have found it has really payed off to invest extra time and effort in the recruitment process.

Job Descriptions

- . Input into Job Description by Traditional Owners
- . Job Description written in plain English
- . Apprentice Job Descriptions put into a shell that can be filled out and submitted without the use of a computer (example attached)

Advertising

- . Six weeks advertising period. We do not advertise in December & January as many local Aboriginal people are involved in ceremonies.
- . Advertise on NT Government Intranet, local paper and on local indigenous radio (CAAMA)

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- . The words “This is a local Aboriginal identified position” must accompany any ads to comply with discrimination laws
- . Promotional posters (attached) are displayed in all local Aboriginal councils, educational institutions and sporting venues and other popular ‘hang out joints’ along with application shells
- . Job descriptions are sent through our extensive email distribution list of local Aboriginal organisations, families and individuals.
- . We promote positions face to face to Traditional Owners and other local Aboriginal families
- . Aboriginal staff promote through their extensive family networks

Shortlisting

- . If applicant does not quite meet selection criteria on paper we contact them and have a chat as their verbal communication skills may be better than written (well developed written communication skills are not a requirement for entry level positions).
- . If we feel they do meet the selection criteria we may assist them to modify their application prior to interview.
- . If we don’t receive many applications we follow up any potential interested people from networks, get out and about and chat to people.

Interviewing

- . 3 person panel ensuring a gender balance and at least one Aboriginal panel member (staff and or Traditional Owner)
- . We usually interview outside in a quiet open area or inside in an area with plenty of natural light.
- . We outline employment conditions, notification of absence and on and off the job training.
- . Although we have set questions the interview is an informal chat using many scenarios to get the most out of the interviewee.
- . The most important thing we need to assess is the applicant’s interest in and commitment to the position. Individuals may be under pressure from families. This is not a recipe for success for the individual, the family or the Park

Cross cultural HRM / mentoring

All Park staff undertake cross-cultural, Arrernte language and anti-discrimination training and there is a culture of support for the Indigenous Employment Program.

Department managers are mentors and have high level cross-cultural skills to:

Build self-esteem

- . Walking into a predominantly white government institution on day one can be an intimidating feeling and many young Aboriginal people have very low self esteem
- . In order to build self esteem we capitalise on what people are already good at / feel confident about
- . We have high (but realistic & achievable) expectations of all our staff and provide regular and honest feedback

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- We create 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.
- Putting Aboriginal staff on “pedestals” is detrimental to the individual in the long term as they burnout and can create feelings of favouritism.
- Bush knowledge and skills are given equal status to western scientific knowledge and team members share knowledge
- We develop, promote and maintain a team perspective by instilling pride in the individual, the team and the Park.

Develop work ethics

- One of the biggest hurdles can be overcoming problems of reliability and punctuality.
- If you have grown up in a family where neither parent has had a job a work ethic can be a new concept.
- We often start people in a temporary or casual capacity if we feel work ethic skills need to be developed.
- It is important to ensure all parties are working by the same definitions being mindful of complications relating to the cultural interpretation of language.
- A watch is part of our uniform and we will provide one if necessary
- We discuss transport at interview and if there are problems we try to arrange a lift with other staff living near by.
- We ensure new starters understand that the tourism industry works by the clock and that being late will upset your workmates and make the Park look bad.
- Sometimes people think that if they are late or don't turn up they will get in trouble or lose their job and feel ashamed to call and let us know. We help them understand that they are allowed to be sick we just need to know so that we can plan for it.
- We have a washing machine, clothes line and iron and provide boot polish.
- We are currently developing a weekly self evaluation & supervisor evaluation of attendance, punctuality and dress standards to set a good foundation, if necessary, in those first few months.

Build trust

- Individuals need to feel that we have their best interest at heart. Aboriginal staff are very “marketable” and there are many requests to stick cameras in their faces. While some people are quite happy to do this sort of thing others feel *aperange* (shame).
- We do not commit staff to anything of this nature without first seeking their consent and giving them a good run down on what will be expected. They know it is OK to say no.

Manage culture & work culture

- Demands, obligations and challenges exist for people who live and work within two cultures.
- Sometimes it is necessary to help staff step between Western and Aboriginal cultural demands
- Aboriginal staff who are “culturally superior” (Traditional Owners / older / male) to other Aboriginal staff may try inappropriately delegating tasks and the recipient may feel culturally obliged. EEO principles and practices exist in NT Govt departments.
- We find creative (but fair) ways of managing cultural imperatives (eg they'll beat me if I don't go to the funeral). We swap days off and utilise time in lieu so that funerals can always be

attended. NT Government Bylaws exist that have avenues for cultural approval from the Director for bereavement leave and Leave With Out Pay for cultural reasons).

- We have had to manage the implications of families involved in conflict (payback) in the workplace. We sought guidance from the involved parties and put them on opposite shifts until things settled down.
- We help staff understand why visitors ask ignorant, inappropriate and culturally offensive questions. We collectively develop non-defensive answers to these questions and empower the offended individual to become the visitors' guide to better understanding. (FAQ's attached)
- It is often necessary to counsel staff if they are faced with interracial prejudices from other local Aboriginal people ie "why are you trying to be white" "Your not one of us...you don't belong here....". "what right has a half caste like you got to tell us about culture"
- Sharing is integral to local culture, if you have money you are obliged to share it. We sometimes set up two bank accounts for our apprentices (one without key card access) so that they are able to save some money. Apprentices wages are very low and losing part of your pay each week becomes a very big disincentive to work.

Helpful tips for Managers

- Leave your mind wide open at all times.
- Learn to take off your own cultural eyes.
- Expect to make mistakes.
- Learn to laugh at yourself and learn from your mistakes
- Encourage the Aboriginal staff to be your guide to better understanding
- Take time
- Don't make assumptions
- Be consistent