

# Cultural mentors work

Anna King Murdoch

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**ONE of the many mysteries of travelling into central Australia is the conspicuous absence of Aborigines working in any of the white business enterprises.**

Take Voyages Ayers Rock Resort in the Yulara village about 20km from Uluru with its four hotels, apartments, camping ground, lodge and supermarket. It employs 660 people of whom 21 are in their "indigenous employment program". Where they are, though, is anyone's guess.

The rest of the township of Yulara – which includes the emergency services, fire and police departments, airport, primary school for residents' children, post office, ANZ bank and tour operators – is also devoid of indigenous faces. Even at the gracious Greg-Burgess-designed cultural centre near the rock, the majority of employees seem to be non-indigenous.

This is ironic considering that what makes the area so fascinating – and these businesses so successful – is the Aboriginal culture. No doubt many of the more than half a million visitors also wonder why this is so.

There are Aboriginal people working out of the white village but not very many. The 132,566ha Uluru-Kata Tjuta National Park employs 10 Anangu people in full-time jobs and another 40 in casual or day labour. Of the few Aboriginal-owned businesses, the particularly successful Anangu Tours – which has been inducted in the Tourism Hall of Fame – employs two indigenous interpreters and 30 guides. Significantly, it provides a laundry and kitchen facilities for making breakfast and lunch in its office.

Meanwhile, the rest of the Anangu are languishing over at Mutitjulu, a collection of basic houses in a dusty grid-streetscape near the base of Uluru. Overshadowed by the rock – which, with its caves, pools of fresh water and sheer spiritual power, once played such a vital role in their survival – this community made the front pages of the national media last year for the tragic self-destruction of its young people from petrol-sniffing.

Though the petrol bowser is now covered by a metal case, the essential problem – the aimless lives of its young people – remains unchanged.

So where are the white enterprises in the central desert that are employing the indigenous people? According to Trevor Satour, an Alice Springs Aborigine and a director of Indigenous Employment Specialists in Canberra, the place to watch is the Desert Park in Alice Springs.

Set up about nine years ago at the base of the West MacDonnell Ranges by Northern Territory Parks and Wildlife, the park has won many major tourism awards and TV naturalist David Attenborough has said that "there is no museum or wildlife park in the world that could match it".

But apart from creating what must be one of the best nocturnal houses and bird of prey shows in the world, it has set itself the goal of providing as many jobs as possible to the young Aboriginal people of Alice Springs and – even more importantly – by engaging indigenous mentors, of not allowing them to fall through the net.

Of the park's 48 employees, 12 are now Aboriginal and most are training to be future rangers. Again, as with the successful Anangu Tours, the park provides them with essential help before they even start work: an alarm clock, a place to shower and an iron. Another reason why the Desert Park is succeeding is that they are "persistent". "If something goes wrong, they don't drop their bundle," Satour says. "About 60 per cent of our mob will disappear from a job because of some issue to do with the peer group or family or the community environment, particularly the younger ones going into traineeships. So having a trained indigenous mentor who is also a local who can work it out makes a win-win for everyone involved."

But for all this help from the park – the facilities, the mentors, the respect – Satour expects these young Aboriginal employees to meet their employers half way. And it seems to work. "The park goes out of its way to support them and they're well-trained, they're disciplined and they provide that indigenous style and approach that really comes across well with the tourists. They're bringing in the crowds."

Satour has no doubt this approach will work well in other mainstream businesses in the area if basic facilities and a mentor are provided.

As Vincent Forrester, a mentor and a star guide at the Desert Park, says: "People who say we have no work ethic should at least employ one Aboriginal person first."

Anna King Murdoch is a Brisbane-based journalist