

# CLIMATE CHANGE ADAPTATION ON KOWANYAMA COUNTRY

COMMUNITY REPORT

Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres  
Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS)

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## ABOUT THIS COMMUNITY REPORT

This community report is about the climate change research project carried out by AIATSIS in the Kowanyama community with the Abm Elgoring Ambung RNTBC. The project period is from September 2011 – March 2013. This community report aims to summarise research activities and findings from the climate change project.

## PROJECT BACKGROUND

AIATSIS was funded by the Department of Climate Change and Energy Efficiency's Climate Change Adaptation Research Grants Program administered by the National Climate Change Adaptation Research Facility (NCCARF) to look at how native title holders make decisions about the management of their land and waters to help them to better respond to changes in climate. We carried out our research with Abm Elgoring Ambung and the Karajarri Traditional Lands Association (KTLA) in the Kimberley, Western Australia.



## WHAT IS CLIMATE CHANGE?

When we talk about climate change we are talking about how the seasons and weather are changing, and how this affects Kowanyama people and country. Climate change has caused changes in seasons and weather such as:

- Warming temperatures
- Sea level rise
- Different rain patterns
- More and stronger floods and storms

The Lands Office has a strong history of looking after country for the Kowanyama people and is “Kowanyama’s own black EPA”. Climate change adaptation work is already being carried out through work such as:

- Wetlands monitoring
- Fire monitoring
- Town planning
- Water planning
- Feral/animal eradication



## WHAT IS CLIMATE CHANGE ADAPTATION AND HOW DOES IT RELATE TO NATIVE TITLE?

Climate change adaptation is the work we do to reduce the adverse consequences of this. For example, better land use planning and changing water management practices.

Registered Native Title Bodies Corporate (RNTBCs or PBCs as they are commonly known) are in a strong position to contribute to climate change adaptation because of their:

- Native title and other land holdings;
- Responsibilities under legislation; and
- Unique knowledges and experience.

However, PBCs are not included in the governance, institutional and other decision-making structures and practices that are important for climate change adaptation.



## WHY IS PBC EXPERIENCE IMPORTANT?

In Kowanyama and other remote Aboriginal communities there is a history of church and state government control over what people can and can't make decisions about. The creation of the Aboriginal council has meant that community decisions can come from the community.

Setting up the Lands Office has created a unique land management organisation for the Kowanyama people.

With native title determined in 2009 and 2012, the Kowanyama people have had their culture and relationships with land recognised under the *Native Title Act 1993* (Cth). The PBC has a legal responsibility to look after Country.

It is important for government and others who want to do business on Country to talk to the Kowanyama native title holders.



## RESEARCH FINDINGS

In Kowanyama there is a strong history of the Lands Office protecting the interests of the Kowanyama people. However, in our research we found that the way in which land is managed in Kowanyama has been changed by:

- The recognition of native title and the formation of the PBC. The PBC has legal responsibilities to manage Country.
- The need to work out how decisions are made and what Council and PBC are responsible for.
- The mainstreaming of community governance through local government structures that can be amalgamated, potentially taking away community control.
- Planning work required by state governments requiring the input of native title holders.

There is a need for partnerships between Council and PBC to work together and plan for development, housing and land and water use. This helps prepare the Kowanyama community for climate change.

We hope the research will encourage government agencies to consider PBCs and climate change in their planning decisions.



## RESEARCH ACTIVITIES

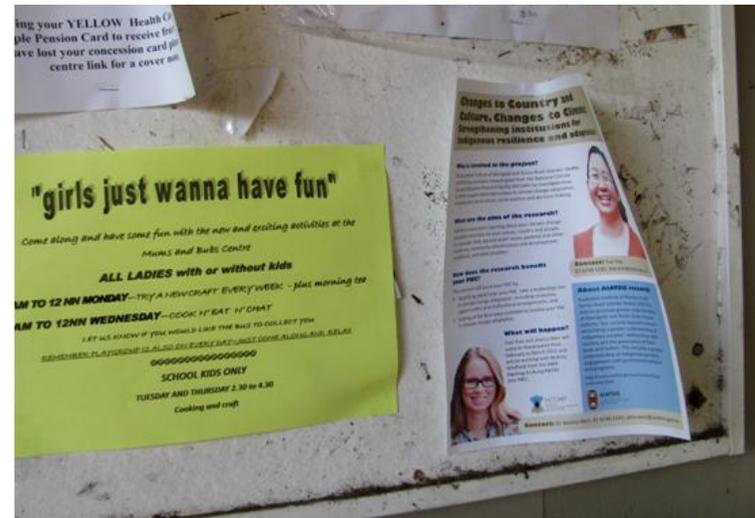
### *National Native Title Conference Townsville, 4-6 June 2012*

Teddy Bernard, Charlotte Yam, Raven Greenwool, Robert Holness and Rodney Whitfield were funded to participate in a workshop at the 2012 National Native Title Conference. At the workshop, Rodney talked about the experiences of Abm Elgoring Ambung and how it was hard to be handed native title without tools, funding or resources to look after country for the Kowanyama people. The conference was attended by native title holders across Australia. Dr Christine Regan wrote a newsletter article on the workshop and a longer workshop report.



### *Fieldwork February – March 2012*

Tran and Jess visited Kowanyama from February – March 2012 to learn more about the Kowanyama community and meet with the directors of Abm Elgoring Ambung. Tran and Jess (with Dr Lisa Strelein and Claire Stacey) wrote a project report based on their research experiences.



## CASE STUDY 2: KARJARRI TRADITIONAL LANDS ASSOCIATION

*Bidyadanga, Western Australia*

“We’re not on our own when it comes to climate change and that’s what we need to realise that, but we need to also be putting in the effort, and consciousness and the decision-making process that will assist us to make the right decisions. And having the policy and structures in place to be able to support the decision-making process....We need to form alliances and partnerships with the community, and the community needs to understand the native title holders’ – traditional owners’ – perspective and responsibility to look after country.”

Joe Edgar, Deputy Chair

“Being the custodians of this place ‘you know’ of this community we are the custodians and because Bidyadanga has taken over the community.....it’s actually trying to get the council to sit with KTLA and go through this thing together ‘you know’ as one and not split down the middle like that’s what happen when we got our land rights and we then was split, we were the outsiders and we didn’t then have much say then on the community...but if we could actually sit down with them and the ILUA could binds us together where we do work together ‘you know’ into looking after country....the broader ILUA and I am hoping that we do start a good relationship with them to work together to do this to keep up with the climate change.”

Faye Dean, Director



*KTLA directors and members participating in a workshop in Bidyadanga on climate change, 4 August 2012. (left to right) Joe Edgar (Deputy Chair), Lenny Hopiga (Director), Faye Dean (Director), Joseph Munro (Director) Anna Dwyer (Nulungu) and Rene Hopiga (Member) (image: Jessica Weir)*

## CONTACT US

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Thank you for taking part in this research

