

‘We know they healthy cos they on country with old people’: demonstrating the value of the Yiriman Project

May 2016

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Senior person: The signs that countrymen are getting healthier is that old people are on country. We know young people healthy because they on country with the old people. We know us old people are healthy because we with young people. We know country is healthy because together we on country. That is the sign. We always tell when country is healthy ... the old people is there, country been fired, plenty of food on country and jila (water hole) were clean. Then we get taken away from country ... it get sick ... we get sick ... we come back and country come alive ...and we come alive ... young people come alive.

Introductions

Before making a number of points in relation to the Committee's inquiry it is important that I introduce myself. I am presently a tenured academic at Murdoch University and responsible for teaching undergraduate and postgraduate students in the Community Development Programme. I also spend considerable time in my role as a researcher carrying out evaluations of projects designed to respond to the needs of Aboriginal communities. Over the course of the last 25 years I have been visiting the Kimberley region for various research and professional purposes. Since 2004 I have had the opportunity of working in conjunction with the Yiriman Project, studying the organization and its work with young people. From 2010-2013 I undertook a formal evaluation of Yiriman's work at their invitation.

I would live to begin by applauding the Committee's decision to carry out work examining the challenges that face Aboriginal people and the awful incidence of suicide.

What follows are observations about one programme that, in part, is designed to respond to the mental health and wellbeing of Aboriginal young people in the southern Kimberley region. I will do this by making reference to some of the findings of my research report.

Summary of evaluation

This offers a three-year evaluation of the Yiriman Project. The period relevant to this work was 2010-2013. The research was made possible through funding made available from Fitzroy Futures.

The report does a number of things. It begins with a description of the research methodology adopted in evaluating the project and the key research activities undertaken during the evaluation. This included carrying out a range of methods such as undertaking an 'audit review' comparing evidence against various contracted outcomes, interviewing a series of people involved with the project (cultural 'bosses', young people, workers, community and other organisations), preparing a set of case studies of young people involved, taking account of claims and observations made about the project by others (Parliamentary Inquiries, Magistrate's public statements, assessments from committees of review for awards, reviewing relevant research from elsewhere, comparing Yiriman's activities with the international research on successful practice, assessing project records and documentation and participating in a number of Yiriman activities during each of the years under study. The key findings were then triangulated to establish a broad set of conclusions about the effectiveness of the work.

The report includes the following sections:

The challenges of research and demonstrating the efficacy of Yiriman

Using multiple methods to test efficacy

Observations about the goals of the Yiriman Project

What happens on a Yiriman trip?

The evidence

- *An audit review*
- *Observations of outsiders*
- *Evidence of individual change (case studies)*
- *Evidence of community change*
- *Evidence from elsewhere of the efficacy of culture, language and country*
- *Comparing 'good practice' with the Yiriman Project*

Conclusions

Key themes in the report

The Yiriman project has received funding from a number of government and industry organizations. This includes:

- **J.T. Reid Trust:** employment & training of Aboriginal staff
- **FHCSIA:** back to country trips, cultural and knowledge exchanges with young women, elders & other organisations
- **Health & Ageing:** support cultural activities to strengthen self-confidence, self-esteem & good health to combat youth suicide
- **Attorney General's:** support crime prevention work with young people
- **Woodside Energy:** support cultural bush camps to connect young people and elders, young people to country, cultural immersion & language and a chance to reflect and evaluate their life & provide guidance.

The report describes what happens when Yiriman takes people 'on-country'. Trips are multi-faceted and include:

- planning and governance by elders
- visiting sites, walking and looking after country
- making artefacts and producing art
- learning about skin and respect
- learning language and old stories
- hunting and wild harvest activities
- working with researchers
- learning and performing dance and song
- carrying out workshops (suicide prevention, self development, crime prevention, health)

The report concludes that there is solid evidence of the efficacy of the Yiriman Project both in relation to Indigenous aspirations and positive social outcomes identified by funding bodies. Although there are many challenges faced by Karajarri, Nyikina, Mangala and Walmatjarri families, the Yiriman Project continues to enjoy community support and active involvement. Young people who have 'been through' Yiriman activities continue to take on leadership roles in a

range of organisations. There is much evidence that Yiriman is providing a range of important opportunities to young people, particularly in the Fitzroy Valley region. Most impressive in this regard has been Yiriman's ongoing support of work with Ranger teams, Wild Harvest activities and the provision of cultural immersion opportunities to young people as a preventative measure against crime, suicide, poor education and health. Also of national significance has been Yiriman's modeling of outstanding community governance. Indeed, so impressive has been this work that in 2012 the project won Reconciliation Australia's National Governance Award. It is also the case that Yiriman has been working successfully and in conjunction with other local organisations such as schools, employment services groups, the justice system, mental health services and ranger teams.

Importantly for senior people, visiting country provides them with clear signs that young people are getting healthy. This is because in their view you can tell that people are getting healthy when they are on country. At the same time their view is that a sign that country is getting healthy is when you see people visiting. In this way Yiriman provides them with one important means through which 'kanyirninpa' can exist. That is that senior people can 'hold', 'carry' and transmit knowledge to young people. Expressions of these views include the following:

Going out bush is beautiful ... young people find themselves when they're out there.

You can support your family out there ... you're teaching your kids that knowledge [so that] when they get married ... they go back to that country and get animal from there

We got lots of kids not following our culture, not following mainstream culture, they following lazy culture. We gotta stop this ... Yiriman has been doing this for ten years

Yiriman is a role model, give them confidence, lift young people up, so they next lot to pass this on.

We got to look at our old people. We got to use a different school. Yiriman is like a school for our young people – learning our duty of care for country

Old people do lots of singing, get young people into language group, we tell them what skin we. Get them respecting old people.

Old people been tell story, young people pick up that story

We encourage young people to get away from town to learn about culture, language and respect.

To find yourself you have to get lost. Best place to get lost is country

We teach them you gotta chuck away that idea that somebody over you.

We teach a lot about country, looking after animals and things and be rangers. I am really proud of them young people today. They are really leaders.

We been doing bush medicine through Yiriman. It is not for us but for the young so they carry on.

We put together four language groups. We feel for these kids and want to get them out on the country where their mothers and fathers come from.

During the year we used to dig Jila out, to clean water hole. People used to go out and be dancing and singing to keep us healthy.

The following data gives a general sense of the numbers of young people and community members provided with support through their involvement in Yiriman activities over the period from 2008-the present time. It is important to note that this data changes in form and numbers over this period. This reflects regular changes in the reporting requirements of funding bodies.

How much support (2008-2010)

| Type of support | 2008-09 | 2009-10 | 2010-11 |
|-------------------------------------|--------------------|--------------------|--------------------|
| One on one | 124 (37 female) | 157 (12 female) | 203 (95 female) |
| Family | 24 | No records | No records |
| Workshops | 32 | 13 | 13 |
| Cultural activities | 110 | 78 | 78 |
| Intense (suicide, mental health) | 3 | 3 | 2 |
| Referral through family/community | 62 | 62 | 203 |
| Referral through others | 47 | 13 | 168 |
| Referral through police and justice | 15 | 17 | 35 |

How much support (2012- 2013)

| Type of support | 2012 | To March 2013 |
|-----------------------|----------------|-----------------|
| One to one | 93 (25 female) | 32 (12 females) |
| Workshops | 42 | 42 |
| Cultural activity | 61 | 32 |
| Previous participants | 69 | 22 |
| New participants | 24 | 10 |
| Between 1-8 hours | 9 | 32 |
| 2 days | 46 | No records |
| 5 days | 43 | No records |
| 7 days or more | 4 | No records |

The report uses the following rating scale of performance in the audit review section of the report.

Table: Rating scale for performance

| | |
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| Unclear | There is insufficient information to make a judgment about this element of the work. |
| Inadequate | This element of the work does not meet industry standards and has not met the requirement of the funding contract. |
| Slow progress | This element of the work has been held up or still to begin |
| In progress | This element of the work has yet to be completed, is ongoing and/or is going according to plan |
| Completed and good | This element of the work has adequately met the expected industry standards and expectation of the funding contract |
| Strong | This element of the work clearly meets industry standards and very solidly meets the requirements of the funding contract. A measure of the quality of this element of the work is that it is consistent with the best standards being applied in similar work elsewhere. |
| 1 st Class | This element of the work is impressive and represents an example of practice that is rarely matched in similar work elsewhere. A measure of the quality of this element of the work is that it is capable of featuring in academic literature, winning recognised awards, conference presentations or professional development training. |

Using this scale the report assesses performance thus:

Community Investment Programme (FaHCSIA)

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| Objective one: Back to country trips initiated and designed by women |
| Objective two: Back to country trips led by senior elders. |
| Objective three: Workshops on Indigenous knowledge as a foundation for sustainable economy |
| Objective four: Partnerships with other organisations |

Suicide Prevention (Dep Health)

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| Objective one: Younger people learn and reconnect with culture, strengthen identity, value culture & take on cultural responsibilities |
| Objective two: Build self-esteem & self-confidence in young people. |
| Objective three: Strong young adult mentors take on responsibility and leadership roles. |
| Objective four: Community ownership and support. |
| Objective five: Community members feel they can better respond to challenges faced by young people. |
| Objective six: Increased awareness about mental illness, drug/alcohol abuse & suicide |
| Objective seven: Relationships between young people, mentors & cultural leaders resulting in respect & understanding. |
| Objective eight: Individuals & family 'at risk' able to better acknowledge problems, know where to seek support & feel more comfortable doing so. |
| Objective nine: Relationships developed between community organisations & young people. |
| Objective ten: Promotion of positive messages |
| Objective eleven: Healthy fun activity in safe space without the use of alcohol and drugs. |
| Objective twelve: Positive and healthy discussions in a safe environment. |
| Objective thirteen: Having a break from town and enjoying the bush without the use of alcohol and drugs |

Indigenous Justice (Attorney General)

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| Objective one: Advocacy and support |
| Objective two: Build stronger relationships with individuals and family groups |
| Objective three: Foster networks and relationships with organisations and groups that work with young people and focus on mental health and alcohol and drug abuse. |
| Objective four: Planning for bush trips |
| Objective five: On-country trips |
| Objective six: People at risk of incarceration provided with prevention and diversion. |
| Objective seven: Supporting different locations |

Cultural bush camps – Woodside

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| Objective one: Connect young people and elders |
| Objective two: Connect young people to country |
| Objective three: Provide young people with cultural immersion, cultural practices and language |
| Objective four: Provide opportunities for young people to reflect |
| Objective five: Provide guidance to young people. |

First class effectiveness has been achieved in the following areas

Back to country trips

- With families and across generations planned in conjunction with elders – trips through 2011 included 383 participants with over 200 young people – trips in 2012 included 331 participants with 200 young people.
- Work on Indigenous knowledge as a foundation for sustainable economy – particularly Women's Wild Harvest Project
- Number of community supported events - 40% on top of plans in 2011
- Number of community involved - over 150, 50% on top of plans for 2011 and 2012
- Connect young people and elders - average trip numbers between 15-20 young people, six young mentors, 6 middle aged people and three to six elders
- Connect young people to country - 100% of young people involved in daily cultural activities
- Provide young people with cultural immersion, cultural practices and language - 100% of trips language, stories, song, hunting, bush tools, walking and visiting sites, and most were involved in traditional dance

Trips during 2011

- Karajarri Jila Healing Trip (December 2010) – 47 participants
- Jilji Bore Trip (May) – 11 participants

- 9 Mile Trip (May) – 26 participants
- Yakanarra Culture Training – 22 participants
- Ngarantjadu Trip (June) – 82 participants
- Ranger Forum – Middle lagoon, Yiriman and StandBy Suicide Response delivered 'Suicide Awareness Workshops. – 68 participants
- Karajarri family trip (August) – 12 participants
- Karajarri Women's Healing Trip (September) – 27 participants
- KALACC dance trip (September) – 44 participants
- Nyikina Camel trip (October) – 17 participants
- Goonyandi trip (November) – 27 participants

Trips during 2012

- Jalangarti hunting trip (February) – 62 participants
- Kurku (April) – 52 participants
- Corkbark Karajarri (April) – 61 participants
- Jilijan Rangers (June) – 26 participants
- Gogo trip (July) – 31 participants
- Yarrie Yarrie (Aug, Sept-October) – 73 participants
- Walmatjarri Seed collection (Nov-Dec) – 26 participants

Suicide prevention

- Young people learning and reconnect with culture, strengthen identity, value culture and take on cultural responsibilities - 100% of young people on trips are involved in deep cultural immersion
- Strong young adult mentors take on responsibility and leadership roles - trips had at least six young mentors take up work
- Relationships between young people, mentors and cultural leaders result in greater levels of respect and understanding - all trips had at least three generations involved (most had four), elder led meetings each day in morning with instruction in skin, language, land use, song and story
- Promotion of positive messages - evidence in the form of multimedia records are stunning
- Healthy and fun activity involving young people and community in safe space without the use of alcohol and drugs - photo, film and audio footage is very strong
- Positive and healthy discussions in a safe environment - photo, film and audio footage is very strong
- Having a break from town and enjoying the bush without the use of alcohol and drugs - photo, film and audio footage is very strong.

Crime Prevention

- Planning for bush trips and on-country governance by bosses – this represents that strongest example of on-country governance the researcher has seen. In 2012 this was

recognised by Reconciliation Australia when it judged Yiriman the National Award for Indigenous Governance.

- Managing on-country trips – development of processes, infrastructure and risk management dramatically on the rise in the last two years
- Supporting ‘service’ in Fitzroy Crossing - many outside service organisations attested that they rely on contacts created by and through the project

The report then turns to a review of what others have concluded in relation to the achievements of Yiriman. It highlights the remarks of the following external bodies:

- WA Government ‘Inquiry into successful initiatives in remote Indigenous communities’ – Yiriman is one of the top programmes in the state (2008)
- Federal Social Justice Report - Yiriman a leading national example (2008)
- Politician Shelly Archer committed a full Adjournment Speech to the project and called it ‘exceptional’ (2009)
- Principal of Fitzroy School said “I have seen young men return from Yiriman changed people, without a doubt” (2010)
- A national study of youth practice – Yiriman works ‘because a middle generation acts as bridges, translators, mediators and role models between young people and their elders.’ (2010)
- Winner of Reconciliation Australia’s National Indigenous governance award - “cultural bosses make the decisions based on community and cultural knowledge. It means they can focus on helping their young people, without worrying about the logistics” (2012)
- Professor Mick Dodson - “It is a powerful testament to community action & should be supported because what else can the government point to that is working?”

The report also identified that the project delivered successful outputs in addition to the funded contractual obligations. This was particularly in relation to language transmission, cultural maintenance and knowledge and practice related to the ‘Indigenous domain’. Indeed, one of Yiriman’s standout achievements has been its ability to support the aspirations of Indigenous bosses and their families to ‘hold’, ‘carry’ and transmit cultural knowledge and practice across the generations.

The report also includes a set of accounts of the lives of 40 individual young people who have been variously described as ‘Yiriman Alumni’, ‘past participants’ or in the words of cultural bosses, ‘Yiriman Leaders’. Care needs to be taken in understating the importance of other influences on these young people. However, there is good evidence that Yiriman has had a very positive impact on the lives of a range of young people who are now taking on leadership and contributing positively in their communities. Indeed Yiriman ‘Alumni’ have become Rangers, artists, film makers, toured internationally as dancers, returned to school, are now raising families, become teaching assistants, fishery researchers, completed TAFE courses, taken jobs as community health workers, language translators, cultural tour guides, worked in the resource industry, acted as Yiriman workers/mentors and are involved on wild harvest leadership work.

The report also documents how the project has assisted other groups to do their business noting its importance in the caring for country and land management movement (with Ranger teams, AOIS); support for Broome-based organisations offering ‘on-the-ground’ point of contact with young people (Justice teams, DCP); ‘piggy backing’ trips with others (KLC, Standbyme); providing an important ‘feeder’ for Ranger teams (Nyikina Mangala, Karrajarri, Ngurrura, Gooniyandi); offering parents and families in Fitzroy Crossing ‘daily’ support; supporting senior people’s health and wellbeing; offering middle age people opportunities to step into cultural

leadership roles; assisting researchers with contacts and culturally relevant ways of working; providing schools with contact to 'non-attenders'; and supporting festival and ceremonies (KALACC dancing).

Additionally the report reviews a body of international research, particularly more 'hard' and statistical comparative work concerned with the correlation between 'on country activity' and positive social consequences. In particular this research demonstrates a direct correlation between the practice of culture, language and 'on-country' activities with improvement in 1) employment, education and training participation (Chandler et al. 2003; Dockery 2007, 2009a and 2009b; Halloran 2004), 2) improved physical health such as cardiovascular and renal function, alcohol and smoking related illness and diet (Burgess et al. 2009; Brook et al. 1998; McDermott et al. 1998, O'Dea 1984, Scrimgeour 2007 and Dockery 2009a and 2009b), suicide prevention (Chandler et al. 2003, Kinnane 2010) and decreases in crime and justice related activities (Chandler et al. 2003).

This work provides an important deductive means of testing the usefulness of the work undertaken by Yiriman. Based on the evidence from elsewhere we can deduce that if Yiriman is using practice that has been established to be successful it follows that they will see similar success in social outcomes. In particular, using this research we can say with confidence that there is a positive correlation between Yiriman's work and social consequences such as physical health and wellbeing, education, training and employment outcomes, language and cultural maintenance, community building, suicide prevention, land management and crime prevention. Furthermore convincing evidence exists that these elements of work are intricately tied up together. Success in any one element is most likely when the others are also present.

Conclusion

The report establishes solid evidence of the efficacy of the Yiriman project. It is well respected by members of the community. It has consistently carried out on-country trips and supported the cultural maintenance aspirations of communities across four language group areas. Part of its history involves the creative trialing of new technologies to help in the work of cultural maintenance and youth development. Last year it was nationally recognised when it won Reconciliation Australia's Indigenous Governance Award. In his observations echoing the decision of the 10-member panel Professor Mick Dodson said:

What makes for good policy are things like Yiriman. It is a powerful testament to community action and should be supported because what else can the government point to that is working, I'd like to know. If they say well lets put the money into Psychiatrists or other government led programmes then show me how that works?

When you look at what Yiriman does it is not new. It is ancient actually. Elders have been taking young people on country, teaching them how to survive and telling them where to find water and how to use plants and animals to survive, dance, sing the country and telling them stories for country ... that has been happening for thousands of years. So there is nothing unique about that. I guess what makes it unique in a modern context is that this is the only group that I know about, that has deliberately set out to do what people have been doing for thousands of years as a way to try and address problems associated with troubled youth and also to deal with what has been a shocking rate of suicide in young people. That is new in a sense.

It should not be expected that the project is a panacea for the range of difficulties confronting communities in the Kimberley. However, there is good evidence that taking young people and members of older generations on country is important for their health. There are definitely immediate healthy effects of taking young people away from their poor diets and living conditions. There is also evidence that Yiriman has assisted in the campaign to minimise young people's

involvement in the justice system. Indeed, some, including a local magistrate, conclude that Yiriman is more capable in this regard than most other diversionary and sentencing options.

There is certainly evidence (tracked through case studies) that a range of young people have been nurtured through their involvement in Yiriman. Many young people have used the project as a stepping-stone, moving into positions of leadership in their community. They and others claim that Yiriman has been of central importance in this regard. There is also good evidence that Yiriman helps bolster the health of old people and other generations. This is the way that senior people talk about Yiriman and this is what one can see firsthand if you are fortunate enough to participate in a trip. Perhaps of most importance is that Yiriman continues to achieve what the old people set it up to achieve, helping people to visit country, maintain connections and bring out stories. Throughout the region people regard Yiriman as a vehicle to maintain culture and law.

Yiriman's longevity puts it in a good position to consolidate and consider extending its reach. Its achievements demand the attention of government, philanthropic organisations and the broader community. The author is presently involved in reviewing many community-based projects across the country Australia. In his view the Yiriman Project represents one of the country's most impressive stories of local people's attempts to deal with the central and pressing public policy challenge of securing the future for Indigenous young people living in remote communities. Having last week attended the National Aboriginal Suicide Conference and listened to those struggling with solutions and programme ideas he is more convinced than ever that Yiriman offers an important example of how we can design community-based and culturally driven projects.

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