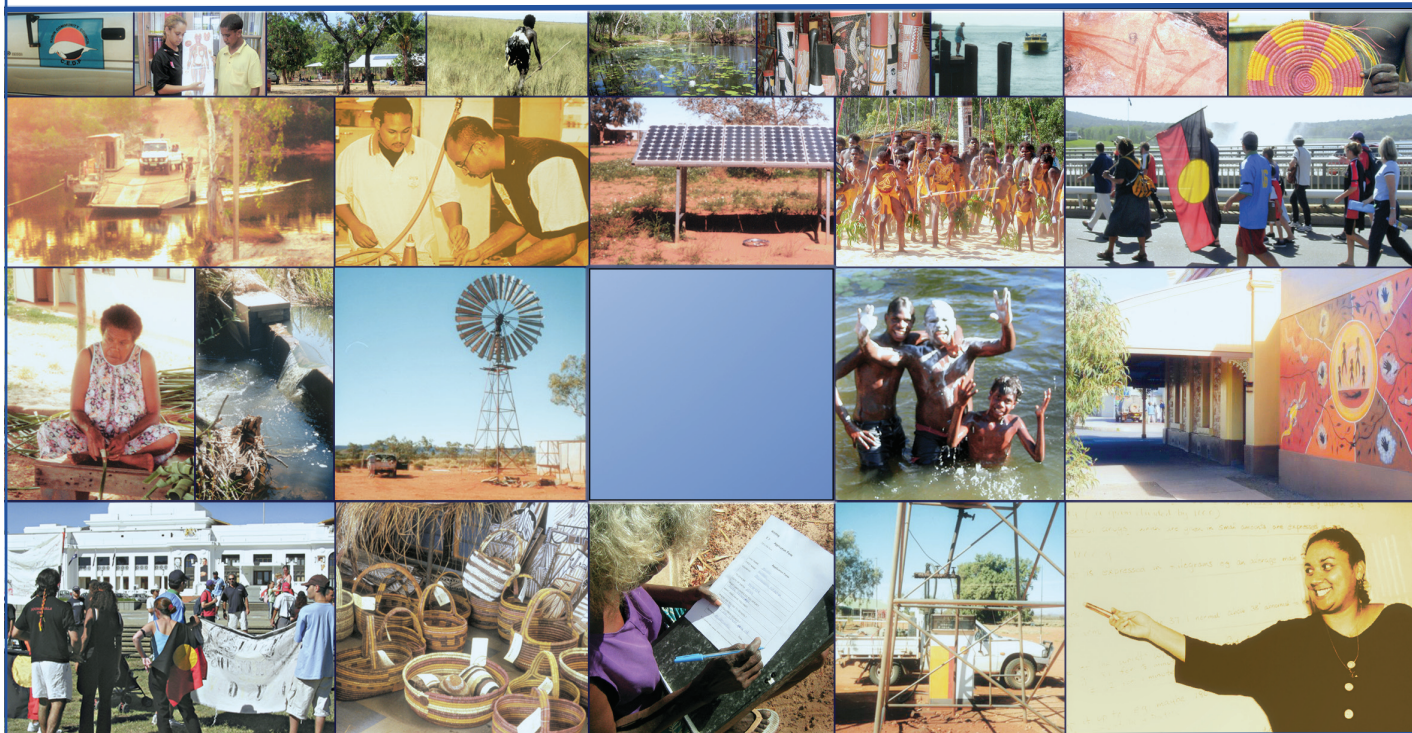


# WHY THE NORTHERN TERRITORY GOVERNMENT NEEDS TO SUPPORT OUTSTATIONS/HOMELANDS IN THE ABORIGINAL, NORTHERN TERRITORY AND NATIONAL INTEREST

J.C Altman, S. Kerins, B. Fogarty & K. Webb

CAEPR Topical Issue No. 17/2008



## CONTENTS

---

Introduction .....	1
1. Outstations/homelands are centres of Aboriginal economic, cultural and spiritual life.....	2
2. Biodiversity maintenance through a populated landscape.....	3
3. Why should outstations/homelands be resourced? .....	4
Good for people.....	4
Good for the environment .....	5
Depopulated landscape .....	5
Weeds and Wildfire: Two practical examples .....	6
4. Outstations/homelands and services .....	7
5. A piecemeal approach to supporting people on country .....	8
6. Next steps.....	9
References.....	11

# Why the Northern Territory Government needs to support Outstations/Homelands in the Aboriginal, Northern Territory and National Interest

## Submission to the *Northern Territory Government Outstation Policy Discussion Paper*

Jon Altman<sup>1</sup>, Seán Kerins<sup>2</sup>, Bill Fogarty<sup>3</sup> and Kate Webb<sup>4</sup>

1. ARC Australian Professorial Fellow and Director, Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research, Australian National University, Canberra; e-mail: [jon.altman@anu.edu.au](mailto:jon.altman@anu.edu.au)

2. Research Fellow, Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research, Australian National University, Canberra; e-mail: [sean.kerins@anu.edu.au](mailto:sean.kerins@anu.edu.au)

3. Doctoral Researcher, Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research, Australian National University, Canberra; e-mail: [bill.fogarty@anu.edu.au](mailto:bill.fogarty@anu.edu.au)

4. Aurora Intern, Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research, Australian National University, Canberra; e-mail: [u3938925@anu.edu.au](mailto:u3938925@anu.edu.au)

## INTRODUCTION

The development of a Northern Territory outstation/homelands policy which meets the needs and aspirations of a dynamic and highly mobile population is extremely important. It is a complex and difficult task, but one which provides an important opportunity for outstations/homelands to be viewed as an integral component of the Northern Territory Government's vision for 'a framework for a sustainable future where development takes place within a context of land and sea conservation' as envisaged in the Northern Territory Parks and Conservation Masterplan 2005.

An innovative outstation/homeland policy which solves the problem of government service delivery of Indigenous Australians' citizenship entitlements—so that it provides a choice for Indigenous Australians where they want to live and how they want to engage nationally and internationally in social, cultural and economic life—is urgently needed.

The development of an outstation/homeland policy provides the opportunity to recognise service delivery as a two-way process—one where governments provide citizenship entitlements to Indigenous Australians living in remote regions and in turn enjoy the crucially important services that Indigenous Australians provide to wider Australia in the form of biodiversity management, ecosystem maintenance, coastal surveillance, border protection and biosecurity. These services are of increasing importance, especially in times of climate change, and cannot be regarded as a subsidiary issue. Rather, they are at the centre of the economic future of northern Australia and as such must be at the centre of serious policy development which recognises and values people living on country.

We caution against the narrow view of the *Northern Territory Government's Outstation Policy Discussion Paper* which focuses on outstations as an isolate severed from surrounding country and unattached to the wider Indigenous population and settlement hierarchy (Altman 2006). It is our view that a discussion of Indigenous residence on country is best undertaken within the broader and more important discussion of maintaining a peopled landscape or what we refer to in our current research as People on Country (see <[www.anu.edu.au/caepr/country/index.php](http://www.anu.edu.au/caepr/country/index.php)>).

Indigenous residence occurs regionally and flexibly between larger and smaller communities. It is a mistake to view larger townships and surrounding outstations as fixed entities with fixed populations. Importantly, outstations/homelands sit within a broader cultural and geographic framework. They serve an important function, besides residence, of assisting Indigenous Australians maintain their connections to their estates, maintain biodiversity and ecological knowledge, care for sites of significance, maintain language, culture and law, as well as making a livelihood from the customary utilisation of wildlife. Outstations/homelands are used for a large variety of purposes by people at different stages in their lives, and have diverse facility and service needs. An outstation/homeland that is vacant for periods of time may nonetheless be of substantial benefit to the people who use it periodically and also for regional and national strategic reasons, as an empty landscape is a vulnerable landscape.

Outstations/homelands have a positive effect of reducing crowding and social tension in larger communities. Outstations/homelands aid individual and community wellbeing through reinforcing peoples' rights and responsibilities to country and family, maintaining community networks and social structure, and strengthening identity.

Importantly, outstations/homelands have been central to innovative economic initiatives such as carbon abatement, wildlife utilisation, eco-tourism and the art and craft industries. Economic heterogeneity in the form of the examples discussed above is especially important in times of market contraction and failure.

## 1. OUTSTATIONS/HOMELANDS ARE CENTRES OF ABORIGINAL ECONOMIC, CULTURAL AND SPIRITUAL LIFE

Outstations/homelands are at the centre of Aboriginal economic, cultural and spiritual life across much of Australia. Outstations/homelands represent a strong Indigenous priority, as was recognised by the Blanchard Report (1987). They are the result of Indigenous initiatives to improve wellbeing by providing a social setting within which Indigenous languages, ecological knowledge, culture and law can remain strong and relevant, and so underpin community development, economic initiatives and sustainable land and sea management.

The importance of outstations/homelands to Aboriginal people is clear from the number of outstations/homelands and the number of people who live in or utilise them. There are an estimated 500 outstations/homelands, with approximately 10,000 people associated with them and another 40,000 people linked to outstations/homelands and country but often residing primarily in larger 'township' communities in the region (Altman 2006). The majority of these are on land held under the *Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act 1976* but others are on excisions from pastoral leases or in national parks (Community Living Areas (CLAs)). Outstations/homelands represent an established and preferred settlement mode for a significant proportion of the Aboriginal population outside of the small number of urban areas such as Darwin and Alice Springs.

There are many reasons for Aboriginal people to return to their traditional lands. Outstations/homelands provide opportunities for Aboriginal people to pursue healthier lifestyles through the reduced reliance on store-brought foodstuffs and lower rates of substance abuse and domestic violence. They provide for

---

### CLA:

Community Living  
Area

---

greater community autonomy from the often restrictive or destructive outside forces. Living on country allows Aboriginal people to live closer to sites of significance, enabling the intergenerational transfer of both customary law and Indigenous ecological knowledge—vital ingredients in the maintenance of healthy people and healthy country (Myers 1986; Altman 2003).

Outstation/homeland residents continue to play vital roles in the ceremonial life which underpins Indigenous wellbeing in remote Australia. Some outstations/homelands can accommodate up to 400 residents during peak ceremonial activities.

The Indigenous visual arts industry is one example of productive economic activity which has grown out of the homelands movement. It has recently been estimated that the sector is valued at a minimum \$100 million per annum Australia-wide, with most art produced at remote communities. The NT Indigenous Arts Strategy launched in 2003 notes that this activity is a significant employer and source of cash income in regional and remote communities where opportunities for market engagement are rare (see <<http://www.nt.gov.au/nreta/arts/artsnt/pdf/NTIAS.pdf>>). The Strategy also notes that the sector supports a range of positive cultural and social outcomes. It is estimated that 5,000–6,000 arts practitioners in remote communities engage in visual arts production, yet there is no recognition in official statistics of this high level of participation. Materials utilised in this highly productive industry are locally procured resources. The majority of art and artefacts created on outstations/homelands reflect unique motifs, stories and themes from the specific area in which they were created, which adds to their value.

## 2. BIODIVERSITY MAINTENANCE THROUGH A POPULATED LANDSCAPE

People on country, living on outstations/homelands, are an essential ingredient to the sustainable economic future of the Northern Territory and wider Australia.

Over the past three decades over 20 per cent of the Australian land mass has been returned to Indigenous Australians as a result of successful land rights and native title claims and land acquisition programs (Altman, Buchanan and Larsen 2007). In the Northern Territory, Aboriginal-owned lands equate to close to 50 per cent of the land mass. Recent legal decisions, such as the Blue Mud Bay High Court judgment of 30 July 2008, which confirmed Indigenous people in the Northern Territory are the owners of an estimated 5,600 kms of intertidal coastline, suggest that Indigenous people will also potentially have a growing role to play in coastal and fisheries management issues (see <<http://www.crikey.com.au/Politics/20080801-Understanding-the-Blue-Mud-Bay-decision.html>>). This extensive coast and sea country requires active management and constant surveillance. The most efficient and cost-effective way to undertake these essential services is through Indigenous engagement with people living on country on outstations/homelands.

What we term the Indigenous estate includes some of the most biodiverse lands in Australia. Official natural resource atlas maps indicate that many of the most intact and nationally important wetlands, riparian zones, forests, and rivers and waterways are located on the Indigenous estate. This is especially so for the Northern Territory (DNRETA 2005). Mapping also shows that these lands are at risk of species contraction and face major threats from feral animals, exotic weeds, changed fire regimes, pollution and over-grazing (Woinarski et. al. 2007). On top of these threats, the latest available climate science suggests that substantial biodiversity impacts on this crucial part of the continental landmass are inevitable. In the face of this, an innovative national policy approach, of which a robust outstation/homeland policy is one component, is required to support innovative Indigenous community-based efforts to ameliorate threats



and minimise adverse biodiversity outcomes. This position is based on the documented recognition by CSIRO that effective resource management is much less expensive than environmental repair, something that is very clear from recent experience in the Murray-Darling Basin in south-east Australia.

While much of the Indigenous estate is not commercially viable for 'old-economy' pastoral and agricultural uses, it is a significant environmental and ecological asset (Altman and Dillon 2004). Some bio-regions are largely intact, while others face pressures from wildfires, weeds, feral animals and other threats that result from the lack of a peopled landscape. The recent *Fourth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change* found that many regions will face an increased threat to biodiversity with the onset of climate change, including an increase in pests, weeds and wildfires (Hennessy et al. 2007; see also Dunlop and Brown 2008; Millennium Ecosystem Assessment 2005; NRMCC 2004). This may result in adverse patterns of biodiversity change over relatively short timeframes (Altman et al. 2007: 33).

It is important to note that a robust and dynamic Aboriginal culture and the maintenance of biodiversity is at the heart of the Northern Territory tourism industry, which attracts many hundreds of thousands of domestic and international visitors to the Northern Territory each year. Outstations/homelands are at the centre of maintaining both Aboriginal culture and biodiversity which underpin the strong Northern Territory tourism industry.

The *Northern Territory Government's Outstation Policy Discussion Paper* does not fully recognise the substantial contribution that Indigenous people on country make to the crucially important and on-going role in relation to biodiversity maintenance, border-security, coastal surveillance and ecosystem management.

### 3. WHY SHOULD OUTSTATIONS/HOMELANDS BE RESOURCED?

Outstations/homelands are good for people and good for the environment.

#### GOOD FOR PEOPLE

Outstations/homelands are good for people. Biomedical research has identified that outstation/homeland residents enjoy considerably better physical and mental health (Morice 1976; McDermott et. al. 1998). People living on outstations/homelands are often engaged in cultural and natural resource management activities, and the delivery of these activities requires increased physical activities and access to a healthier diet (O'Dea 1984, O'Dea et. al. 1988, Naughton et. al. 1986).

While the quantitative measurements of increased health for outstation/homeland residents is evident, it is equally important to recognise the qualitative aspects of this health gain. These benefits and strengths are found in ethnographic research. The ethnographic research informs us that 'Indigenous people are situated within their country emotionally, psychologically and metaphysically. When country is well, people are likely to be well too, and thus to experience a sense of satisfaction and order in their own place' (Rose 1996, 38-39).

Residents of outstations/homelands play important roles in the maintenance of Indigenous languages. Each Aboriginal language is deeply rooted in and shaped by the country in which it developed. The maintenance of language is closely related to the maintenance of country as knowledge and experience of country, seasons, species, sites of cultural significance and names of country.

## GOOD FOR THE ENVIRONMENT

---

Outstations/homelands are good for the environment. Indigenous Australians living in remote Australia in outstations/homelands play an important and often unrecognised role in the delivery of essential services to wider Australia (and people from other countries, predominately through tourism) in the form of biodiversity management, ecosystem maintenance, coastal surveillance, border protection, and biosecurity. These services are of increasing importance, especially in these times of climate change, and cannot be overlooked as a mere side issue. Rather they are at the centre of the sustainable management and economic development of northern Australia, and as such should be at the centre of policy development.

Historically, natural resource management on the lands that now constitute the Indigenous-owned estate has been either absent or significantly under-resourced (Altman and Dillon 2004; Altman, Buchanan and Larsen 2007). While some Indigenous land-owners currently engage in cultural and natural resource management activities, much of this is conducted informally and outside the market or is poorly remunerated, pointing to a significant opportunity for enhanced investments (Altman 2007). Opportunities exist in managing ecosystems to minimise environmental damage and in developing environmental programs that help reduce Australia's carbon emissions, as well as, building the capacity of Indigenous communities to become more effective in relation to the protection of critical habitats of threatened species and ecological communities.

There are a number of examples of the important role that Aboriginal people living on country play in biodiversity maintenance and developing innovative economic initiatives. We provide two examples in the boxed text below.

## DEPOPULATED LANDSCAPE

---

It is important to understand the enormous risk that a depopulated landscape has for the Northern Territory and wider Australia. A clear example of the negative ecological impacts of a depopulated landscape can be seen on the Waanyi/Garawa Aboriginal Land Trust on the Northern Territory/Queensland border. This land trust covers 12,000 sq kms and contains areas of high national conservation value. Since traditional owners moved off the land trust because of the lack of provision of basic services that they should enjoy as a citizenship entitlement (health, housing and education), their country has experienced large-scale late dry season hot fires. In some years these fires burn in excess of 16,000 sq kms, and extent beyond the land trust area. Neighbouring pastoral properties estimate up to 80 per cent of feed is lost from such wildfires. The long-term result of these uncontrolled hot fires is evident across much of the land trust, where vast areas of country have lost significant areas of vegetation. The loss of this vegetation means the loss of feeding and breeding habitats for many native, especially endemic threatened, species. The loss of vegetation also causes the exposure of skeletal soils to erosion. In all likelihood, without people living on country and the resumption of Aboriginal fire management, these soils will slowly choke the rivers and billabongs and significantly reduce the habitat of marine species. Such hot fires also emit additional greenhouse gases that marginally exacerbate global warming.

In the past many outstations/homelands were set up to fail. This occurred predominantly in remote areas on marginal lands where Aboriginal people regained ownership of land because of the economic failure of settler society in the pastoral industry, or in running government settlements and missionary communities with public sector support. Despite the economic failure, often of a single non-Indigenous family enterprise, Aboriginal families were encouraged to return to these lands and engage in the same activity (cattle) where others had failed. The Waanyi/Garawa Aboriginal Land Trust in the southern Gulf of Carpentaria is just one example of this. Other failures can be traced to poor service provision,

## WEEDS AND WILDFIRE: TWO PRACTICAL EXAMPLES

The Northern Territory has extensive infestations of *Mimosa pigra*, an invasive plant that forms dense monocultures which choke wetlands, restricting biodiversity and impacting people's health through the loss of access to nutritional food sources. Mimosa has the potential to spread throughout the wetlands of Northern Australia, further adding to costs of agriculture, nature conservation and tourism. Aboriginal people living on country in outstations/homelands have been at the forefront of identifying new infestations and containing and eradicating already established infestations of Mimosa (NLC 2006). The Northern Territory currently has 119 declared weeds with numerous others such as Rubber Vine (*Cryptostegia grandiflora*) advancing from the east; all of which which pose further threats to the Northern Territory's tourism and pastoral industries. In a depopulated landscape weeds can quickly establish thriving communities, impacting on biodiversity, increasing the intensity of fire regimes and adding to downstream management costs. The enormous savings from early detection of ecologically altering weed infestations and the other ecological threats to Northern Australia such as feral animals needs to be recognised and considered in the development of outstation/homeland policy.

The economic costs of the loss of biodiversity are potentially enormous, especially in the Northern Territory where biodiversity underpins the tourism industry. It is estimated that the agricultural cost of weeds to Australia is in the vicinity of \$4 billion in lost production per annum. The cost to nature conservation and landscape amenity is thought to be of similar magnitude (NRMMC 2004). With the potential of substantial costs to the tourism and agricultural industries through lost production, biodiversity loss and degraded landscapes and waterways, the Australian Government's investment of \$20 million per annum to outstation/homeland maintenance is minuscule in any risk assessment analysis.

A second example of the important role that Aboriginal people living on country play in biodiversity maintenance and innovative economic initiatives can be seen in the West Arnhem Land Fire Abatement (WALFA) project. The WALFA project was built using the Community Development Employment Program (CDEP), along with funding from the Natural Heritage Trust (NHT), philanthropic organisations and the private sector. Most importantly the project necessitated the return of traditional owners of the Arnhem Land Plateau to country and the establishment of a new outstation, which has been the driving force and important learning centre for the WALFA project (TSCRC n.d.).

The WALFA project, as well as reducing green house gas emissions, served as a catalyst for regional Indigenous partnerships in fire management (Warddeken, Jawoyn, Djelk, Adjumarllarl and Mimal land management groups) and building partnerships between Indigenous and non Indigenous organisations (Bushfire NT, Tropical Savannas CRC). Furthermore, it has provided a stable base for traditional owners of the Arnhem Land Plateau to undertake numerous cultural and ecological projects in protecting critical habitats of threatened species and improving their recovery. Without outstations this highly successful project would fail.

The WALFA project has provided a model for similar emerging carbon abatement projects such as the Central Arnhem Land Fire Abatement project and the Gulf Fire Abatement project, which will further add to greenhouse gas reduction, biodiversity maintenance across the Northern Territory, economic development and community capacity building in remote areas.

### WALFA:

West Arnhem Land  
Fire Abatement

### CDEP:

Community  
Development  
Employment  
Program

### NHT:

Natural Heritage  
Trust

### ORA:

Outstation  
Resource Agency

poor governance and lack of transparency of some Outstation Resource Agencies (ORAs) as was noted in the National Review of Resource Agencies Servicing Indigenous Communities, which found variation in performance and recommended further capacity building of the underperforming ORAs (see Altman, Gillespie and Palmer 1998). While some would argue that this is evidence of why outstations/homelands are unviable, we would argue the opposite. The new and emerging economic opportunities of carbon abatement, wildlife utilisation, fee-for-service biosecurity and coastal surveillance opportunities alongside the art and tourism industries holds far greater potential for Aboriginal people living on country than has ever been available in the past.



## 4. OUTSTATIONS/HOMELANDS AND SERVICES

---

We cannot provide a focus on all services—health, housing, education, employment—that need to be delivered to outstations/homelands. Instead we focus on education as one case. We do this in part because delivery of education is seen as the most significant and intractable problem in servicing small dispersed outstation/homeland populations.

Outstation/homeland schools, or Homeland Learning Centres (HLCs), were created as a direct result of Australian Government policy supporting Aboriginal people's return to country. Initial infrastructure costs were provided by the Commonwealth and service provision became the responsibility of the Northern Territory Government, along with the provision of education on outstations/homelands. Since the genesis of the outstation/homeland movement successive NT Governments have argued that the cost of providing outstation/homeland schooling is excessive and that the Australian Government should bear some of the cost. The Australian Government has always maintained that education is a State/Territory responsibility and that such costs should be covered by federal-state fiscal arrangements. In reality, this has resulted in a 'provision and policy gap' that has ensured HLCs have never received equitable funding when compared to Community Education Centres in the larger community townships. Consequently, outstations/homelands have generally received low levels of service (see Blanchard 1987, Commonwealth of Australia 1985). This ongoing tension over funding has undermined a unified Australian and Northern Territory Government outstation/homeland policy which includes the delivery of education to Australian citizens living in remote regions.

Given the funding tension and the past 30 year Australian Government failure to develop a robust outstation/homeland policy, it is easy to understand that the Northern Territory Government is in an extremely difficult position when it comes to the provision of educational services in outstations/homelands. This challenge has been exacerbated by the recent Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) for Indigenous Housing, Accommodation and Related Services with the Australian Government (2007), which effectively hands all responsibility for outstation/homeland services and infrastructure to the Northern Territory Government, without sufficient capital or recurrent funding to maintain current levels of service. This is of great concern, as it is possible that a short-term policy response based solely on fiscal expediency may take precedence over the long-term educational needs of Indigenous children, and indeed, run contrary to the stated policy agendas at federal and state levels regarding the improvement of Indigenous education outcomes. In an era of bipartisan commitment to Indigenous education and unprecedented focus upon Indigenous affairs, one would hope that cool heads prevail and that the future welfare of Indigenous students in the outstations/homelands is not subject to knee-jerk fiscal response.

There is emerging evidence of success in outstation/homeland education. Students in Maningrida and Yirrkala, for example, have moved through HLC programs into secondary education, obtained Year 12 certificates and gained full-time employment. Outstation/homeland education has recorded higher rates of student attendance, resident health and well-being is generally higher (see Burgess 2007) and skills obtained from an education 'on country' are in great demand in land and sea management and wildlife enterprise schemes, leading to growing employment opportunities for HLC students.

Mobile models of provision are also improving and can be used to allow for mobility issues (see Fogarty 2005). These may provide new educational opportunities, in particular when combined with e-learning and innovative uses of information technology. It is noteworthy that NT Department of Education and Training (NT DET) has recently created a new 'Director of Homelands' position within the department. This position will, among other things, look to integrate best practice models of distance learning into the HLC program.

---

**HLC:**  
Homeland Learning  
Centre

---

---

**NT DET:**  
Northern Territory  
Department of  
Education and  
Training

---

This will include the school of the air models, correspondence courses and interactive distance learning models. Again, a concerted developmental effort in these areas can and will see increasing successes in the future.

The demographic features of the remote Indigenous population, which clearly demonstrate a young and exponentially growing population (Taylor 2007), mean that it is likely that with continued support HLC education will be necessary and successful into the future. However, a trend towards centralisation of servicing and a 'winding back' of HLC educational support in recent years is a threat to Indigenous education as a whole in remote areas. Experience shows that many outstation/homeland students without a schooling option in the bush generally do not attend school at all. While it is true that some students may integrate into 'hub' schools or boarding facilities, cultural, locational and logistical barriers mean that, without an outstation/homeland education program, many of these students simply dis-enroll from the education system altogether. The potential loss of anywhere between 900 and 2,000 students to the NT education system is something that should simply not be countenanced. These figures become starker when a cursory estimate based on Census Data shows that at least one tenth, or around 1,000 children in outstations/homelands are currently under the age of four. Adding these figures to the potentially disengaged in a year or two is not something that any educator or policy maker desires.

## 5. A PIECEMEAL APPROACH TO SUPPORTING PEOPLE ON COUNTRY

The Blanchard Report (1987) recommended that the determination of outstation/homeland policy be guided by recognition of the long term benefits of outstation/homeland living to Aboriginal people, and thus to Commonwealth, State and Territory Governments. Based on evidence of the positive social, economic and physical outcomes for Aboriginal people of living on country, the report advised *the development of appropriate and forward thinking government policy to sustain the homeland movement*. By supporting the efforts of Aboriginal people to improve their own wellbeing, governments could avert the necessity for costly welfare and development programs in the future.

The long-term benefits of outstation/homeland living to Aboriginal people are evident in the examples mentioned above, for example in carbon abatement activities, art and craft industries, the Northern Territory Caring for Country program; and from the research identifying improved health outcomes for people living on country. What has not been evident is the development of appropriate and forward thinking government policy to underpin these positive outcomes.

The failure by the Australian Government to develop an appropriate and forward thinking policy to assist outstation/homelands to further build on their successes and the failure of service delivery over the last 30 years has not eroded Indigenous Australians determination to remain on their lands. The number of outstation/homelands that have been occupied (many for over three decades) and the variety of economic initiatives growing out of them stand as testament to their resilience and their importance to Indigenous Australians.

There is an unresolved contradiction in Northern Territory and Australian Government policies that recognise the important role that people on country play in the delivery of crucial services (See Altman and Kerins 2008a, 2008b).

For example, Australian Government programs such as Indigenous Protected Areas (IPAs) and Working on Country (WOC) and Working on Country Northern Territory (WOC NT) all recognise the importance of Aboriginal people living on country and actively being engaged in biodiversity maintenance, protecting

---

**IPA:**  
Indigenous  
Protected Area

---

**WOC:**  
Working on  
Country

---

**WOC NT:**  
Working on  
Country Northern  
Territory

---

ecological communities, critical habitats and threatened species for wider Australia. The recent WOC and WOC NT initiatives further augment IPAs and Indigenous Caring for Country initiatives. However, these policy initiatives provide no support for Aboriginal people to reside on country.

Northern Territory Government policy such as *Parks and Reserves (Framework For The Future) Act 2005* (sect 14) and the Northern Territory Parks and Conservation Master Plan (2005) also recognise the important role Aboriginal people play in the future management of national parks and biodiversity maintenance. However, they too provide no support for Aboriginal people to reside on country.

These important policy initiatives are greatly weakened by the current outstation/homeland policy vacuum.

## 6. NEXT STEPS

In 1987 The House of Representatives Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs (HRSCATSIA) completed the report *Return to Country* (the Blanchard Report) but it is far from clear which of its numerous recommendations were implemented by the Australian Government. Similarly, in 1998 the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC) commissioned the only ever national review of ORAs (Altman, Gillespie and Palmer 1999), but again it is unclear if that report's recommendations were implemented in any coherent or comprehensive manner.

In 2007, twenty years after Blanchard and in the aftermath of the Northern Territory Emergency Response (NTER) intervention and with a federal election looming, the Howard government conveniently transferred outstation/homeland support to the Northern Territory Government. Without any transparent basis, the Commonwealth allocated \$20 million per annum to support nearly 500 communities. The transfer was undertaken without a coherent policy framework (see Altman 2006). Given that the Australian Government had explicitly taken responsibility for outstations in 1978 after self government, the absence of such a framework is arguably unconscionable. The Northern Territory Government should not acquiesce to this form of dangerous crisis management.

The Northern Territory Government is now urgently seeking to fill the resulting policy vacuum, but in our opinion, given the many benefits of outstation/homeland living to Aboriginal people, regions, the Northern Territory and the nation, it is imperative that this process is undertaken in a proper and measured manner that is based on a combination of input from Indigenous people and their organisations, empirical evidence, and cogent public policy argument. To press ahead and form policy without such a thorough development process will be extremely risky and likely to generate negative unintended consequences.

We recognise that the proper development of an outstations/homelands policy will be expensive and protracted, and possibly beyond the fiscal capacity of the Northern Territory Government. We therefore suggest that a moratorium is declared on hasty policy development (that appears to be dictated primarily by the three year fiscal window provided by the 2007 Memorandum of Understanding and the establishment of Shires from 1 July 2008), without adequate consideration of the situation of outstations/homelands and their important service organisations.

We make only one recommendation that has also been made elsewhere (see Commonwealth of Australia 2008 <<http://www.aph.gov.au/hansard/senate/commttee/S11434.pdf>>). The Northern Territory Government should approach the Commonwealth Minister of Indigenous Affairs seeking a comprehensive Inquiry by the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs into the situation of outstations/homelands in Australia. In our view such an Inquiry is especially warranted given the Council of Australian Governments' (COAG) commitment to 'Close the Gap' and significant investments in remote Australia announced in the COAG communiqué on 29 November 2008.

---

**NTER:**  
Northern Territory  
Emergency  
Response

---

---

**COAG:**  
Council of  
Australian  
Governments

---

While not wishing to either over-influence or pre-empt the terms of reference for such an Inquiry, issues that warrant consideration include:

- how have numerous recommendations from the Blanchard Report 1987 and ORA Review 1998 been implemented?
- what are the costs and benefits to the nation of outstations/homelands?
- how can services be provided on an equitable needs basis and in a cost effective and innovative way to the smallest, most remote and most politically vulnerable communities in Australia?
- to what extent must outstation/homeland policy and support transcend State/Territory boundaries to ensure that cross border mobility is recognised and accommodated?

It is our view that only such a transparent and bipartisan Inquiry process will ensure an adequate, if belated, consideration of the situation of outstations/homelands throughout Australia, not just in the Northern Territory. It will allow the mobilisation of sufficient outstations/homelands views, an evidence base and cogent argument to ensure proper policy development in an over-politicised area of Indigenous affairs.

It is imperative that the Northern Territory Government delays development of any final outstation/homeland policy until such an inquiry is completed, in part because of the new collaborative federalism in Indigenous affairs evident in the COAG communiqué. We end by emphasising that the precautionary principle must be exercised and that the cost/benefits of outstations/homelands to all stakeholders, but most immediately to outstation/homeland residents, need to be comprehensively assessed. The direct and opportunity costs to both Indigenous people and the nation of bad policy-making in this area could be massive, so risk minimisation suggests that this process is undertaken properly for the first time since 1987.

## REFERENCES

- Altman, J., C. 2003. 'People on country, healthy landscapes and sustainable Indigenous economic futures: The Arnhem Land case', *The Drawing Board: An Australian Review of Public Affairs*, 4 (2): 65-82, <<http://www.australianreview.net/journal/v4/n2/altman.pdf>>.
- 2006. 'In Search of an Outstations Policy for Indigenous Australians', *CAEPR Working Paper No. 34/2006*, CAEPR, ANU, Canberra, <<http://www.anu.edu.au/caepr/Publications/WP/CAEPRWP34.pdf>>.
- 2007. 'Alleviating poverty in remote Indigenous Australia: The role of the hybrid economy', CAEPR Topical Issue No. 10/2007, (first published in *Development Bulletin* No. 72, March 2007), <[http://www.anu.edu.au/caepr/Publications/topical/Altman\\_Poverty.pdf](http://www.anu.edu.au/caepr/Publications/topical/Altman_Poverty.pdf)>.
- and Dillon, M. 2004. 'A Profit-Related Investment Scheme for the Indigenous Estate', *CAEPR Discussion Paper No. 270*, CAEPR, ANU, Canberra, <[http://www.anu.edu.au/caepr/Publications/DP/2004\\_DP270.pdf](http://www.anu.edu.au/caepr/Publications/DP/2004_DP270.pdf)>.
- , Buchanan, G. and Larsen, L. 2007. 'The Environmental Significance of the Indigenous Estate: Natural Resource Management as Economic Development in Remote Australia', *CAEPR Discussion Paper No. 286*, CAEPR, ANU, Canberra, <[http://www.anu.edu.au/caepr/Publications/DP/2007\\_DP286.pdf](http://www.anu.edu.au/caepr/Publications/DP/2007_DP286.pdf)>.
- , Gillespie, D., and Palmer, K., 1998. *National Review of Resource Agencies Servicing Indigenous Communities*, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission, Canberra.
- and Kerins, S. 2008a. *Submission to the Senate Standing Committee on Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport on Natural Resource Management and Conservation Challenges*, CAEPR Topical Issue No. 15/2008, <[http://www.anu.edu.au/caepr/Publications/topical/Altman\\_Kerins\\_NRM\\_1508.pdf](http://www.anu.edu.au/caepr/Publications/topical/Altman_Kerins_NRM_1508.pdf)>.
- and — 2008b. *Submission to the Senate Standing Committee on Environment, Communications and the Arts inquiry into the operation of the Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999*, CAEPR Topical Issue No. 13/2008, <<http://www.anu.edu.au/caepr/Publications/topical/Altman%20Kerins%20EPBC%20Act%201308.pdf>>.
- Blanchard, C.A. (Chairman) 1987. *Return to Country: The Aboriginal Homelands Movement in Australia, Report to the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Aboriginal Affairs*, Australian Government Publishing Service, Canberra.
- Burgess, P. 2007. *Maningrida Adult Health Check Community Report and Recommendations*, Mala'la Health Centre, Maningrida, NT.
- Commonwealth of Australia 1985. *Aboriginal Education Report of the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Aboriginal Education*, Australian Government Publishing Service, Canberra.
- 2008. *Senate Select Committee on Regional and Remote Indigenous Communities*, Reference: Effectiveness of state, territory and Commonwealth government policies on regional and remote Indigenous communities Friday, 14 November 2008, Proof Committee Hansard, Canberra, <<http://www.aph.gov.au/hansard/senate/commttee/S11434.pdf>>.
- Department of Natural Resources, Environment and the Arts (NRETA) 2005. *Northern Territory Parks and Conservation Masterplan*. Northern Territory Government.



- Dunlop, M. and Brown, P. 2008. Implications of climate change for Australia's National Reserve System: A preliminary assessment, Report to the Department of Climate Change and the Department of the Environment, Water, Heritage and the Arts,  
<<http://www.greenhouse.gov.au/impacts/publications/nrs-report.html>>.
- Fogarty, W 2005. "'You got any Truck?'" Vehicles, and decentralized, mobile service provision in remote Indigenous Australia', *CAEPR Working Paper No. 30*, CAEPR, ANU, Canberra,  
<<http://www.anu.edu.au/caepr/Publications/WP/CAEPRWP30.pdf>>.
- Hennessy, K., Fitzharris, B., Bates, B. Harvey, N., Howden, S., Hughes, L., Salinger, J. and Warrick, R 2007. 'Australia and New Zealand', in *Climate Change 2007: Impacts, Adaptation and Vulnerability. Contribution of Working Group II to the Fourth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change*, M. Parry, O. Canziani, J. Palutikof, P. van der Linden and C. Hanson (eds), Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, UK, 507–540,  
<<http://www.ipcc.ch/pdf/assessment-report/ar4/wg2/ar4-wg2-chapter11.pdf>>.
- McDermott, R., O'Dea, K. Rowley, K., Knight, S. and Burgess, C. 1998. 'Beneficial impact of the homelands movement on the health outcomes in central Australian Aborigines', *Australia and New Zealand Journal of Public Health*, 22 (6), pp. 653–8.
- Millennium Ecosystem Assessment (MEA) 2005. *Ecosystems and Human Well-being: Biodiversity Synthesis*, World Resources Institute, Washington DC.
- Morice, R. 1976. 'Women dancing Dreaming: Psychosocial benefits of the Aboriginal outstation/homeland movement', *Medical Journal of Australia*, vol. 2, pp. 939–42.
- Myers, F. 1986. *Pintupi Country, Pintupi Self: Sentiment, Place, and Politics among Western Desert Aborigines*, Smithsonian Institution Press, Washington.
- Naughton, J., O'Dea, K and Sinclair, A. 1986. 'Animal foods in traditional Australian Aboriginal diets: Polyunsaturated and low in fat', *Lipids*, vol. 21, pp. 684–90.
- Northern Land Council 2006. *Celebrating Ten Years of Caring for Country – A Northern Land Council Initiative*, Northern Land Council, Darwin.
- Natural Resource Management Ministerial Council (NRMMC) 2004. *National Biodiversity and Climate Change Action Plan 2004–2007*, Department of the Environment and Heritage, Canberra.
- O'Dea, K. 1984. 'Marked improvement in carbohydrate and lipid metabolic in diabetic Australian Aborigines after temporary revision of traditional lifestyle', *Diabetics*, vol. 33, pp. 596–603.
- , White, N. and Sinclair, A. 1988. 'An investigation of nutrition-related risk factors in an isolated Aboriginal community in northern Australia: Advantages of a traditionally-orientated lifestyle', *Medical Journal of Australia*, vol. 148, no. 4, pp. 177–80.
- Rose, D. B. 1996. *Nourishing Terrains – Australian Aboriginal views of Landscape and Wilderness*, Australian Heritage Commission.
- Taylor J. 2006. 'Population and Diversity: Policy Implications of Emerging Indigenous Demographic Trends', *CAEPR Discussion Paper No. 283*, CAEPR, ANU, Canberra,  
<[http://www.anu.edu.au/caepr/Publications/DP/2006\\_DP283.pdf](http://www.anu.edu.au/caepr/Publications/DP/2006_DP283.pdf)>.
- Tropical Savannas CRC (TSCRC) (n.d.) West Arnhem Land Fire Abatement Project,  
<[http://savanna.ntu.edu.au/information/arnhem\\_fire\\_project.html](http://savanna.ntu.edu.au/information/arnhem_fire_project.html)>.
- Woinarski, J., Mackey, B., Nix, H. and Traill, B. 2007. *The Nature of Northern Australia. Its natural values, ecological processes and future prospects*, ANU E Press, Canberra,  
<[http://epress.anu.edu.au/nature\\_na\\_citation.html](http://epress.anu.edu.au/nature_na_citation.html)>.