

Sustainable governance for small desert settlements: Combining single settlement localism and multi-settlement regionalism

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Will Sanders¹ and Sarah Holcombe²

1. Senior Fellow, Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research, College of Arts and Social Sciences, Australian National University, Canberra; e-mail: william.sanders@anu.edu.au
2. Research Fellow, Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research, College of Arts and Social Sciences, Australian National University, Canberra; e-mail: sarah.holcombe@anu.edu.au

INTRODUCTION

Deserts are, by their nature, sparsely populated areas. On one recent reckoning undertaken for the Desert Knowledge Cooperative Research Centre by Taylor, Brown and Bell, the Australian desert accounted for 45 per cent of the continental land mass but contained just one per cent of the population: i.e. about 180,000 people out of just over 18 million people Australia-wide at the time of the 2001 Census.¹ About half these desert dwelling Australians lived in just five urban settlements with populations of over 10,000 people. Another quarter lived in 17 smaller urban settlements of between 1,000 and 3,500 people. And the last quarter lived in about 400 small desert settlements with average populations of just 100 or so (Taylor, Brown and Bell 2006: 38).

One of the other big demographic facts of the Australian desert is that its population is far more Indigenous than that of the Australian continent as a whole: about 25 per cent compared to 2.5 per cent. This proportion of the desert population that is Indigenous is less in the five large urban areas and more in the small desert settlements. However in many ways this is an artificial distinction, as the large desert urban areas act as service centres for the small outlying settlements and people come and go between them frequently.

With these basic demographic facts in mind, we want to focus in this paper on the governance challenges of these 400 or so small desert settlements; that quarter of the desert population that lives outside the urban areas and is predominantly, though not exclusively Indigenous. Perhaps not surprisingly we have been focusing on this topic in the course of an Indigenous Community Governance Project, undertaken over the last three years in conjunction with Reconciliation Australia and funded by the Australian Research Council. The work has also been supported by the Desert Knowledge Cooperative Research Centre, at first under its old Governance Theme and now under its Core Project on Sustainable Desert Settlements. We have been working with a particular Community Government Council incorporated under the *Northern Territory Local Government Act*, which we would describe as both local and regional. We will return to the experience of this Council later. But first let us say why we describe this Council as both local and regional and how this relates to the policy histories of both Indigenous affairs Australia-wide and third-tier, local government in the Northern Territory.

POLICY HISTORIES

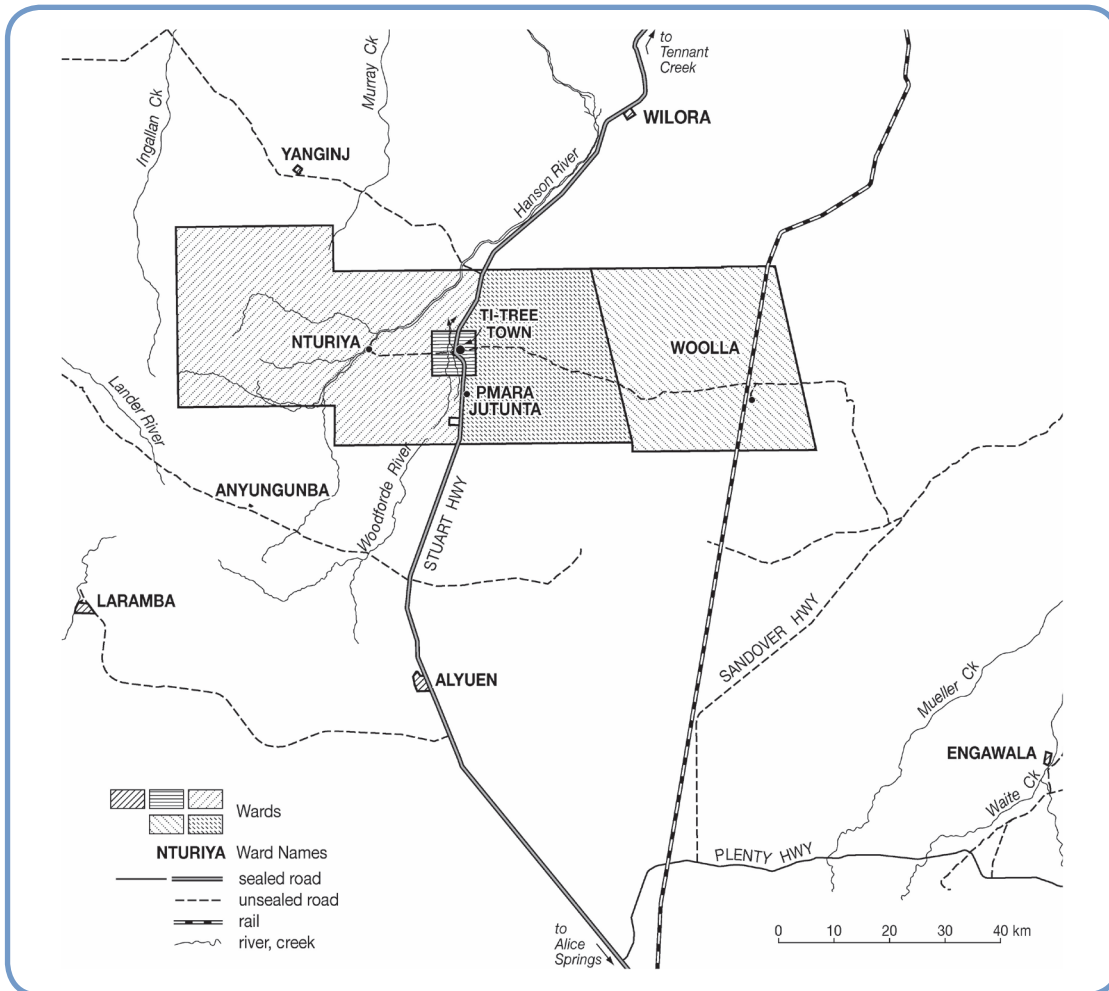
In the 1970s, under an Indigenous affairs policy of self-determination, the Australian Commonwealth government encouraged the incorporation of Indigenous community-based organizations both for the conduct of Indigenous community affairs and for the delivery of services to Indigenous people, including in discrete Indigenous settlements in desert areas. The pattern of incorporation which emerged tended to be highly localized and highly functionally specialized. Many Indigenous community-based service organizations emerged focused on just a single local settlement or, if they were more regional, on a restricted range of service functions.

In the Northern Territory this pattern of incorporation of Indigenous community-based organizations was reinforced after 1978 by the emergence of a community government system under Territory self-government. In attempting to develop its third-tier, local government system beyond its major urban areas, the Northern Territory Government encouraged discrete Aboriginal communities to incorporate under the new Community Government provisions of its *Local Government Act*.² In what one commentator on this period, Wolfe (1989:86), described as a 'laissez-faire' approach, the first half dozen instances in which Aboriginal communities did so incorporate during the early 1980s all emerged as single-settlement local councils. From the mid 1980s the Northern Territory Government became somewhat more promotional and directive and started more actively encouraging multi-settlement incorporations. One of the first of these was Yugul Mangi in south-east Arnhem Land in 1988. A second in 1993 was Anmatjere Community Government Council, in Central Australia half way between Alice Springs and Tennant Creek. This is the Community Government Council with which we have been working the last three years, and in many ways to this day it remains the only regional, multi-settlement Community Government Council incorporation in Central Australia.

During the 1990s, despite an increasing promotion of the idea of regional, multi-settlement schemes, new Community Government incorporations in Central Australia tended still to be single-settlement focused. Also from the late 1980s, the Northern Territory Government began recognizing some other Indigenous community organizations as local governing bodies, referred to as association councils. The result, by the year 2000, was 68 local governing bodies spread across the Northern Territory divided into four categories: six municipalities, one special purpose town, 32 community government councils and 29 association councils. These latter two categories included over twenty councils which covered small desert settlements, almost all of which could be described as single-settlement incorporations. Since 2001, as the push towards regional incorporations has increased, the number of local governments in the Northern Territory has dropped to 63. However, most of the change and movement in the direction of multi-settlement regionalism has occurred in the top end of the Northern Territory, with the emergence of three new regional local governments, rather than in the desert (see Sanders 2006).

In October 2006, the Northern Territory Minister for Local Government, Elliot McAdam, announced the latest push for regionalisation of third-tier, local government in the Northern Territory. He announced that the Northern Territory Government was now hoping for 'regional shires across the entire Northern Territory' by July 2008, rather than just the piecemeal incorporation of some nine per cent of the Territory's land mass into local government schemes as at present (McAdam 2006:5). Although the Minister did not specify how many shires there might be, he was clearly working towards a much lesser number of multi-settlement regional local governments and away from highly localized, single settlement governance arrangements.³

Figure 1. Area and Wards of Anmatjere Community Government Council



As regionalisation of third-tier, local government has been increasingly pushed over the last fifteen years, the older more established pattern of single settlement local incorporation has fallen somewhat into disrepute. It often now seen as part of the inadequacy of current arrangements, as part of the problem rather than part of its solution. Using arguments about scale, multi-settlement regionalism has become seen as the obvious and only way forward.

While single settlement localism does clearly have problems of organizational scale, we want to caution against the idea that multi-settlement regionalism will alone be the solution to the governance challenges of small desert settlements. What seems to us is required, as our sub-title suggests, is a combination of single-settlement localism and multi-settlement regionalism; or as it might perhaps be put, regionalism which respects and builds on localism rather than discounts and disparages it (see also Sanders 2005).

The history of Anmatjere Community Government Council (ACGC) since 1993 bears out some of the benefits, but also some of the costs, of multi-settlement regionalism—and in the rest of this paper we will reflect on some that history.

Before turning to ACGC, however, let us also just note that there are some other instances of multi-settlement regionalism in Australian desert local government, across the state borders in Western Australia and South Australia. These too may be able to be drawn upon in developing ideas for regional shires.

ACGC:
Anmatjere
Community
Government
Council

The first of these is the Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara, established in South Australia under the *Pitjantjatjara Land Rights Act* in 1981. A second is the Ngaanyatjaraku Shire established in Western Australia in 1993, adjacent to the Northern Territory and South Australian borders. Our knowledge of both these arrangements is limited and second-hand, so we will leave it to others to say what their relevance as models might be.

ACGC: CONTRASTING AND CHANGING VIEWS

When ACGC was formed in 1993, it initially brought together nine wards containing small discrete Aboriginal settlements. Three of these wards were on quite extensive Aboriginal-owned land, on the former Ti Tree Station which had by then become the Ahakeye Land Trust. Six were on tiny parcels of land which were excisions from surrounding pastoral leases (See Figure 1). As well as this diversity in land tenure, there was also diversity in population, with some of the settlements having up towards 200 or 300 residents and others down well below the 100 mark. In a classic federal move however, all nine settlements were given two representatives on Council despite these population differences. Also a quorum rule was set which required one representative to be present from each ward which currently had members.

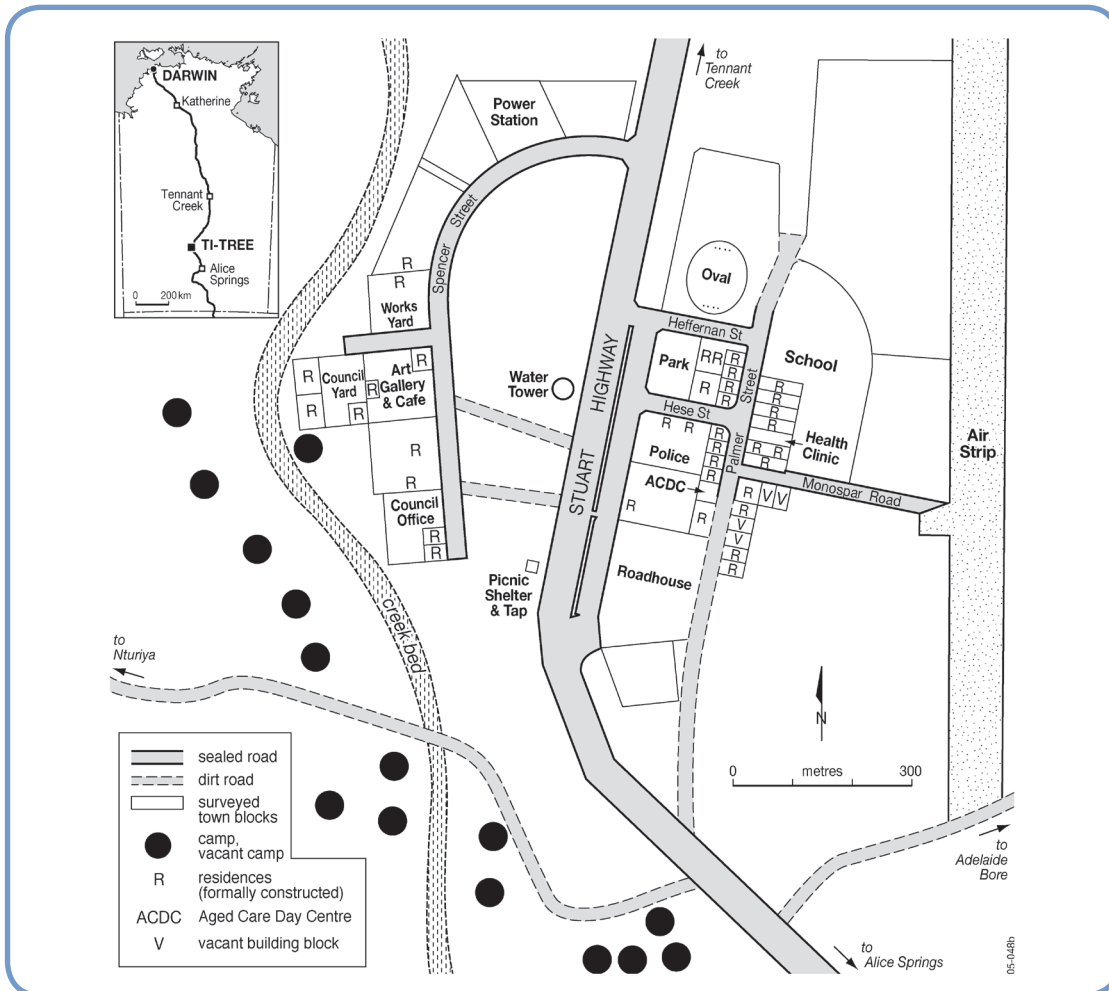
When Ti Tree town was added as a tenth ward in 1995, it too had two representatives. The only concession to Ti Tree's somewhat different status as an open, roadside residential town, rather than a discrete Aboriginal settlement, was a reduced residential requirement for being eligible to vote or stand for office. In the other wards the requirement was 12 months residence during the previous three years, whereas in Ti Tree it was a simple 3 months residence before the closure of the rolls.

From 1995 then, ACGC had four contiguous wards at its centre, covering the town of Ti Tree and the Ahakeye Land trust. Beyond this core land area, however, the new Council only drew in non-contiguous discrete Indigenous communities. Non-Indigenous interests in this surrounding area, like pastoralists, grape growers and roadhouse operators, continued to be left outside the local government scheme (see Figure 1)⁴. Hence ACGC could be viewed in its early constitutional design as a predominantly Indigenous, fairly guarded and just slightly asymmetric multi-settlement regional federation. As a federation, ACGC was quite respectful of the single settlement localism which had preceded it and was embedded within its constitutional design.

One other indication of ACGC's guarded regional federalism was that many of the constituent settlements maintained separate local level incorporated associations even as they joined the new regional body. The largest and most populous outlying communities of Laramba and Engawala, to the south-west and south-east respectively, have been the most vigilant in maintaining these separate organizations. To this day they have the strongest sense within the regional federation of separate local corporate identities. Both Laramba and Engawala ran CDEPs, or Community Development Employment Projects, independently of ACGC until early 2006. Though this has now changed, both Laramba and Engawala are still somewhat wary of ACGC, with so much of its operational base in Ti Tree.

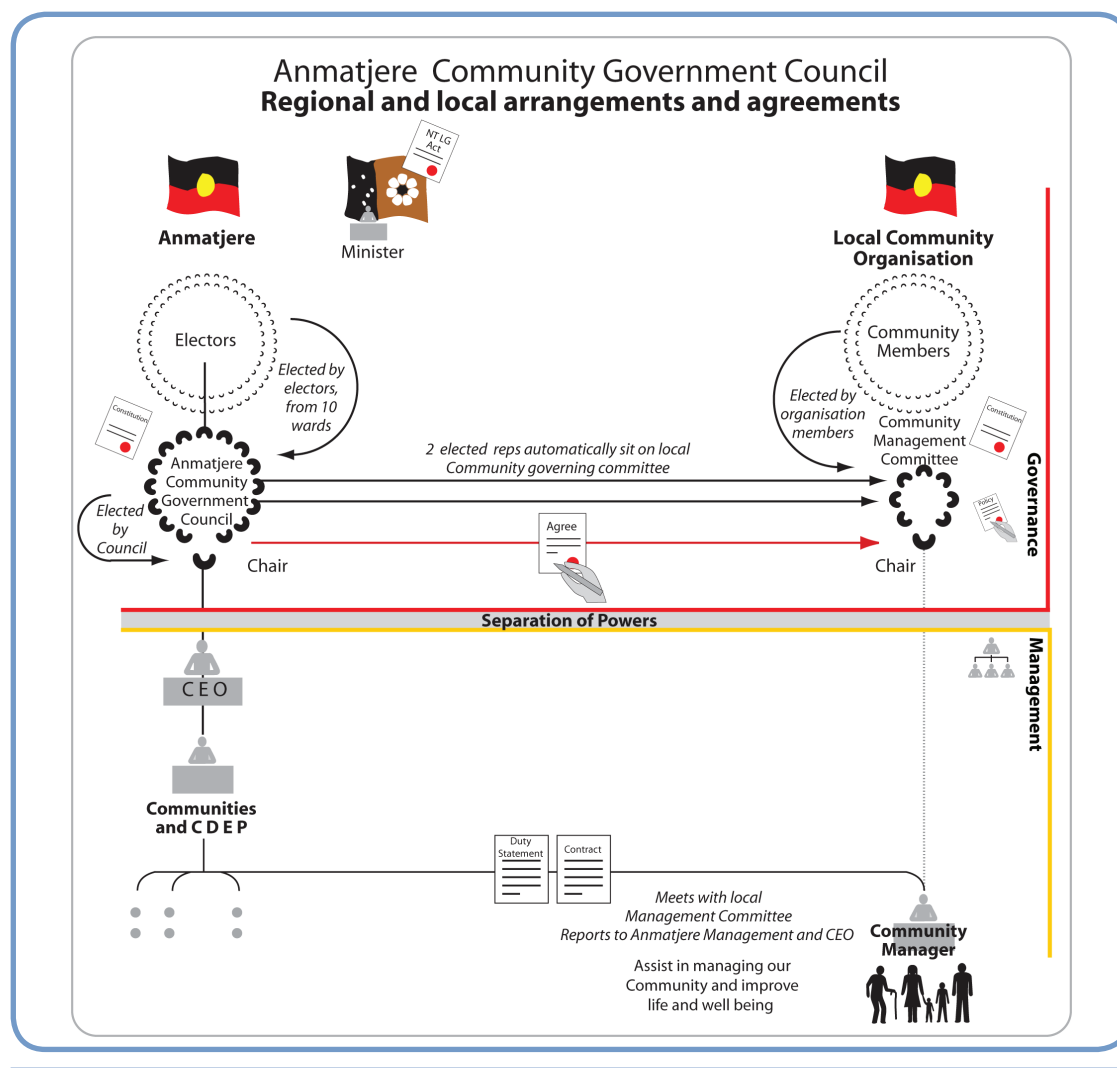
This wariness points to another view of ACGC altogether, which has developed somewhat in practice since 1995. This is of ACGC as highly focused on Ti Tree as a regional centre, while the other wards are slowly being reduced to not much more than outlying, very basic dormitory satellites. This is not just a consequence of ACGC's meeting chambers and its main offices and works yards all being at Ti Tree, but also of other Northern Territory Government infrastructure being located there; like the school, the health clinic, the police station and associated government employee housing (see Figure 2). It is also perhaps not as much of a concern in relation to Laramba and Engawala, which do still retain a strong sense of separate settlement status, being over 100 kilometres from Ti Tree and having their own schools and health clinics. Rather it is of concern in relation to some of the settlements that are within fifty kilometres of Ti Tree.

Figure 2. Ti Tree Town Showing Creek Camp



Community stores at Nturiya and Pmara Jutunta, 17 and 9 kilometres from Ti Tree respectively, have closed in recent years. So residents at these places are now obliged to shop either in Ti Tree or further afield. These closures have had nothing to do with ACGC, yet there is still a sense in which ACGC is seen as part of a centralizing service dynamic within the region. While Nturiya and Pmara Jutunta do still retain significant resident populations, three other wards, all about fifty kilometres from Ti Tree on dirt roads, Yanginj, Anyungunba and Woolla (or Adelaide Bore), have all been essentially without permanent residents during the three years that we have been working with Council. Two of these wards do not currently have representatives on Council, and the third has only one. So there is a very real sense in which these settlements seem to be fading. ACGC, if it is still a federation at all, is increasingly asymmetrical and now contains at best seven or eight active settlements.

One other indication of movement away from the early federation model is that ACGC has recently asked Minister McAdam to change its quorum rule. This arose because, with declining numbers of members in some wards, ACGC was having trouble meeting its high federal quorum rule and was, as a consequence, dismissed twice in 2004 and 2005. After initially indicating that it did not wish to change the quorum rule, Council in 2006 accepted that if it did not move in this direction it would probably be dismissed yet again and would be regarded as unworkable. The new quorum rule, on which ACGC has effectively been operating throughout 2006, is a simple majority.

Figure 3. Burdon-Torzillo's depiction of Regional/Local Relationships

The major issue that ACGC has had us working on over the last two years also relates to this idea of the region, or at least the northern part of it, increasingly becoming focused on Ti Tree. This issue is Creek Camp in Ti Tree—an area on the west side of town where Aboriginal people camp informally in self-built dwellings without reticulated water or electricity (see Figure 2). Informal camping in this area is not new. However, it has been flourishing in recent years, as some of the settlements within fifty kilometres of Ti Tree have been struggling to retain their services and resident populations. Our survey of Creek Camp in April 2005 found people camping there who had previously lived at Yanginj, plus quite a lot of people camping there who also had houses at Nturiya. Our survey also found among the campers a number of local Aboriginal employees of both the ACGC and the Northern Territory Government, and a number of old people who relied for a degree of servicing on the ACGC's Aged Care Day Centre in Ti Tree. All of these people found living in Creek Camp in Ti Tree more sustainable than living in the outlying settlements, with their low levels of service. Or in the case of Nturiya, people simply moved between the two on a very frequent, almost daily basis.

The period of multi-settlement regional Community Government in Anmatjere since 1995 would appear then to have coincided with, if not necessarily caused, a slight hollowing out of some of the discrete

Aboriginal settlements within fifty kilometres of Ti Tree and a degree of service and residential centralization within Ti Tree itself. There have in a sense been costs as well as benefits of a multi-settlement regional approach in Anmatjere, which were perhaps not fully anticipated at the outset.

Further afield in Laramba and Engawala, the federation idea remains stronger – and so too as a consequence does the idea of regionalism which respects localism. During the latter half of 2006, in the wake of ACGC taking over their CDEPs, we have been working with these two settlements, with the consultants Burdon-Torzillo, trying to improve regional/local relationships within Anmatjere. Figure 3 is Burdon-Torzillo's attempt to capture the complex regional/ local relationships between ACGC and Laramba and Engawala and to argue for formalized, signed regional/local agreements. (Note the hand and pen graphic at the centre of Figure 3). The crux of this regional/local relationship is the Community Manager who sits in an office in each of these communities, employed by ACGC. But, as the dotted line in Figure 3 indicates, this Community Manager also has important links to the local community organization and committee, as well as to ACGC. Indeed one could argue that without the support of this local committee, the Community Manager simply cannot function. So unlike the settlements closer to Ti Tree, these two communities of Laramba and Engawala do still retain a very strong sense of regional federalism within ACGC which needs to be worked with and respected.

CONCLUDING COMMENT

Now that Minister McAdam has come out in favour of incorporating the entire Territory in local government schemes, ACGC will, no doubt, be pushed considerably further in the direction of multi-settlement regionalism. This could occur both by the bringing in of non-Indigenous interests in the Anmatjere region who are currently outside the local government scheme and by Anmatjere being encouraged to become part of a larger regional shire.⁵ In these circumstances, we would argue, it will become even more important to remember that single settlement localism still has a role to play in sustainable governance for small desert settlements. Multi-settlement regionalism must respect and build on single settlement localism under the new local government structure in the Northern Territory, as ACGC has attempted to do in the past. The future of third tier governance in sparsely settled desert areas must *combine* single settlement localism and multi-settlement regionalism, rather than attempt to replace one with the other.

NOTES

1. The more common figure used by the DKCRC is 70% of the land mass and 3% of the population. Clearly this includes some semi arid areas with a somewhat higher population density than the core arid areas.
2. The alternative was to incorporate under the Commonwealth's *Aboriginal Councils and Associations Act*, or under general associations incorporation legislation.
3. On January 30, 2007, McAdam announced that there would be nine shires and four municipalities across the Northern Territory in the new structure.
4. In Figure 1, the tiny white rectangle to the west of the Stuart Highway in the Nturiya ward is also an area of grape farms excluded from the local government scheme.
5. In McAdam's announcement of 30 January 2007, Anmatjere was included with five other existing local governing bodies in a proposed Central Desert Shire.

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