The Yiriman Project: a successful story of 'bringing out stories in young people'

Submission to the Parliamentary Education and Health Standing Committee

Re: Inquiry into Successful Initiatives in Remote Aboriginal Communities

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Introductory remarks

1. 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 and Sociology programmes. I have also spent my academic life carrying out many research projects, a substantial number being concerned with the study of programmes designed for Indigenous young people. Over the course of the past 15 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 organisation and its work with young people in remote communities.

2. I would like to begin my submission by **applauding the Committee's decision** to carry out work that identifies examples of 'successful' projects and initiatives in remote Aboriginal communities. In my view there is frequently much more attention paid to social problem identification than concentrated and rigorous study of social and community programmes that have success. Indeed as one involved in providing an education to young people who are keen to work in settings such as remote Aboriginal communities, I and my students are keen to hear 'good news' stories to motivate and prepare us with hope, clarity and ideas.

3. What follows are some observations about **one successful programme** designed for Indigenous young people from remote communities in the

Kimberley region. The Yiriman Project is one of a small number of projects that has been 1) specifically designed to support the lives of Indigenous young people living in remote communities and 2) able to maintain its involvement over a lasting period of time (since 2001).

4. It is not my intention, nor am I able at this time, to outline the costs and benefits of this project. However, I will attempt to point to **some of the features** of the work that have led me to the conclusion that it is worthy of support and, in the right circumstances, reproduction. Rather than comparing and contrasting the work of Yiriman to other projects I propose to describe what I have seen and those features that have impressed me.

5. I will attach two research reviews that I have written about the work of Yiriman. However, given the pressures on members of the Committee I do not expect that they will have time to read them carefully. Therefore I have taken the liberty of **summarizing** some of the conclusions I have made about Yiriman.

What is the Yiriman Project?

6. The Yiriman Project started out because Aboriginal **elders** in the West Kimberley were **worrying for their young people**. In particular, they were concerned about young people who were harming themselves with drugs and 'grog' and getting in trouble with the law. Following long established traditions, they set up an organisation that would help take young people, elders and other members of the community on trips to country.

7. Initially, the project was operating from Jalmadangah, a community some 100 kilometres south east of Derby. After three years, staff moved to **Derby** to expand its operations and make available Yiriman trips to a greater number of communities. So far, Yiriman has been working with the **Karajarri, Nyikina, Mangala and Walmajarri** people, who comprise four Indigenous Australian language groups or cultural blocks in the West Kimberley region. Occasionally they also support similar projects in the north and East Kimberley.

8. Yiriman's work mostly involves hosting what local people call **"back-to-country trips**." In so doing the organization brings together the young, elders, other community members and a range of other people such as land care workers, educationalists, health practitioners, researchers and government officials. Not only is the Yiriman model used as a means to have young people "participate" more fully in the life and experience of community, but it also leads to a range of other events including people's involvement in:

    - land care
    - cultural education

- fire management
- science and economic development
- health care and education
- tourism
- training for employment
- language regeneration

9. In many ways, the idea for the Yiriman Project was not particularly new for those involved. Indeed, the practice of removing troubled youth for periods of time, hunting and collecting food, meeting others, going on country with their elders, taking care of country and walking as a means of learning stories, becoming healthy, building their skills and respecting the old people has **long been a critical part of life** and cultural practice for the Nyikina, Mangala, Karajarri and Walmajarri.

What happens on a Yiriman trip?

10. Typically a Yiriman trip begins when elders and Yiriman workers meet to start planning because they think young people and/or a community need a 'back to country' trip. The destination and major activities planned are the product of a complex set of decisions depending on: who is available to travel, weather conditions, the needs of young people being chosen to participate, local community events, when a place was last visited, the needs of country (e.g. fire management and burning needs) and whether there are opportunities to travel with other groups. Of critical importance at this stage are the direction of the **senior people or 'bosses'** who identify where and when to travel, who should go and the activities to be undertaken. For example, at the beginning of one fire walk that involved twenty young men traveling a distance of over sixty kilometres, the Yiriman team met with senior custodians to consider where and when they should carry out the trip. Discussions started with elders who passed on their direct knowledge of which areas had not been burnt by Aboriginal fire management for over thirty years.

11. Yiriman trips can last **between a couple of days to a couple of weeks**, depending on the area being traveled to, the work being undertaken and the time of the year. Anywhere from between a dozen to almost a hundred people participate in the trips. Recently a group of young men participated in a trip organised by Yiriman in conjunction with the Australian Quarantine Service to carry out tests on feral pigs living along the Fitzroy River. At other times senior people like John and Harry Watson have led long treks with camel teams to carry out fire control work in places like the edge of the Great Sandy Desert. At other times, whole communities with up to one hundred people, from the very youngest to the oldest, walked for a whole week through parts of their country not routinely accessed.

'Back to county' trips for young people

12. In some ways the **Yiriman approach** may appear to be **quite simple**. It involves taking young people 'back to country' to walk with elders and others. However, the most striking feature of Yiriman's work is that it has **many dimensions and is able to achieve a diverse range of things.**

13. Walking and other forms of physical activity have long been a means by which workers with young people have attempted to "engage" their charges. Indeed, since at least the 1880s, a great deal of work with young people has involved **them doing this kind of** physical activity. For example, the Scout and Guides groups, the international Outward Bound movement, groups like the YMCA, Try Excelsior and the National Fitness Council and an assortment of different sporting codes have all sought to incorporate recreation, sport and adventures in rough and dangerous country in an attempt to deal with all manner of youth problems and perceived deficiencies

14. However, to see Yiriman walks as simply a reproduction of conventional Outward Bound work is to misinterpret its breadth and complexity. **Walking** on country with young people is **quite different**. Walking works as an important device for Yiriman in part because of the significance of country in traditional lore and custom and because those involved do it in a way that extends their contact with other generations and groups.

15. Important here is the shared experience of country with elders and others, so that Yiriman trips involves **following in the footsteps** of those who go before. As a senior Walmajarri man, Ned Cox, says of the importance of the Yiriman walks, "Kids gotta know their country, gotta walk the same way as us".

What do they achieve?

16. The experience of walking on country is important here but not in a simple or one-dimensional way. Indeed, walking achieves many things and has a range of functions for Yiriman. It is one means by which young people can be taken out of town and exposed to a very different environment to **reconnect with their elders**, Aboriginal culture and the land of their family. It is also one way of **diverting** young people's attention from drugs and alcohol, anti-social activities and general unhealthy life or what many in the Kimberley call 'humbug'.

17. For those involved in Yiriman trips, the physical demands of the walk are often arduous. Often young people walk between fifteen and twenty kilometres a day, regularly combining travel with other physically demanding tasks such as digging, hunting and collecting firewood. Another important outcome for Yiriman is that young people's **health and fitness is being cared for**.

18. Another strength of the "back-to-country" trips for Yiriman is the important part they play in **land care**. On every trip young people get involved in one or a number of activities that involves looking after or 'freshening up' country. Indeed as a consequence of Yiriman work young people have formed a number of fire teams (in conjunction with the Kimberley Fire Project), established a Ranger team and worked for the Australian Quarantine Service, carried out fisheries research and supported various native title bodies.

19. Yiriman walks also work to encourage more involvement of young people in the lives of their families and **communities**. Indeed, one of the greatest successes of the Yiriman story is the extent to which it has been led by elders, involves young people being given direct and intimate time with others in their community and has resulted in young people taking on **leadership**.

20. No more important on a Yiriman trip is the rich education young people receive in **traditional law and custom**. While on trips, young people accompany adults, particularly elders, on hunting expeditions; are taught language by the old people; sit around the camp hearing stories of the past; look after those who are less physically able by setting up camp and collecting firewood; take care of younger children and work on other practical projects with members of their community while learning about and maintaining culture.

21. Many of the trips are planned to build in **training and education** opportunities. For example, traveling together with trainers young people get to learn how to burn country using traditional and modern burning techniques, take bloods and carry out postmortems for quarantine testing, use machinery for various land care purposes, operate digital technology to record research, build their literacy and numeracy levels, learn about health management and first aid, make films and other production work and create project reports using multimedia and public presentation software.

22. Yiriman also helps young people build **connections and work with others.** Indeed, one of the features of a Yiriman trip is that it rarely occurs without the involvement of outsiders. Typically arrangements are made so that the following groups 'piggey back' and join in on a Yiriman trip:

    - Kimberley Fire Project
    - CALM
    - Kimberley Land Council Land and Sea Unit
    - Derby Aboriginal Health Service
    - Australian Quarantine Service
    - Murdoch University Fisheries Research Centre
    - Various native title bodies
    - Derby Youth Centre

- Kimberley Language Resource Centre
- Shire of Derby West Kimberley
- Northern Australian Indigenous Land and Sea Management Alliance
- Indigenous Coordination Centres

23. Through Yiriman trips, young people also get a first hand experience of **alternatives to their town-based ways of living**. For the duration of the trips they eat healthy food, are free of alcohol and other drugs, live without violence, enjoy themselves, get to spend time with knowledgeable and respected members of their community and take on new and exciting roles.

How does it work so well?

24. There are a number of features of the Yiriman model that have impressed me. Yiriman is a programme that was **established by 'cultural bosses'** and has continued to operate under the clear direction of senior people. There are a number of conventions and processes that allows this to happen. For example, Project Officers are constantly taking direction from the 'bosses' of the four cultural blocks involved in its management. Each trip begins under the direction of local bosses and many join Yiriman trips. Yiriman is auspiced by the Kimberley Aboriginal Law and Culture Centre, the region's principal organisation for the maintenance of customary law and life.

25. Yiriman has also developed some novel devices for ensuring information moves back and forth between cultural bosses', young people, project officers and others in the community. For example, **'picture book reports'** are regularly produced to show, through the use of digital images, language, direct quotes and limited text, what has happened during various trips and activities. These 'picture books' are also used as a way of reporting to other groups on the activities of Yiriman. The books are produced in A3 size and laminated so that they can travel well. They are often used at the beginning of a meeting to draw people into discussion about the business of Yiriman. They also provide evocative evidence of the many achievements and impacts on young people.

26. I have studied a number of examples of the use of **digital technology** in community work. In my judgment Yiriman's simple but effective use of digital cameras already proves it is leading the way in combining digital technology with community planning. As a planning and reporting tool it provides a leading example to others. Indeed, with their permission I have been adapting the process they use and teaching undergraduate and postgraduate students how to increase their skills and repertoire.

27. Another important feature of the Yiriman model that makes it work is that it involves a **multitude of things** happening across cultural domains with a range of different organizations and age groups literally and symbolically

'going along together'. In contrast to many other community-based programmes involving young people Yiriman's work involves considerable **intergenerational** contact amongst children, young people, parents and senior people. It also routinely brings people together from **different cultural backgrounds**. For example, on many trips people from two or more 'cultural blocks' join forces with non-Aboriginal people from different organizations. Those present are exposed to at least four linguistic modes, one of the four languages, Kriol, Aboriginal English and Standard Australian English. As outlined earlier, the effects produced are often multilayered so that the same organisation is involved in firework, fisheries research, quarantine work, diversion from offending, 'community' government and education. Metaphorically then Yiriman allows many other things to '**piggy back**' their work.

28. According to those who established Yiriman, it works in large measure because it is driven by the desire of senior Aboriginal people to pass on their stories to young people. I rarely hear the word 'dialogue', a term popular in government and community services circles, used by people involved in Yiriman. However, 'back to country' trips are first and foremost designed to '**bring out stories**' in young people. Yiriman trips helps seniors pass on a sense of history to young people. It helps in the passing on of important knowledge about 'country', law and culture.

Concluding remarks

29. In my view the Yiriman Project is one of the most **impressive** youth organizations I have seen. It provides one model that could be applied elsewhere in Western Australia.

30. I conclude by thanking the Committee for the chance to make a submission. I **welcome an invitation to appear before them** in person if they believe it would be helpful.

Yours sincerely,

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"Going Back to Country with Bosses": The Yiriman Project, Youth Participation and Walking along with Elders

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Abstract

This paper describes a new approach to youth participation and development used by a youth organization in the West Kimberley region of Western Australia. It offers an account of how people from isolated communities in the north of Australia organize bush trips, or what they call "back to country" trips, to bring together the young, elders, and other community members. Not only is this used as a means to have young people "participate" more fully in the life and experience of their community, but it also leads to a range of other events including young people's participation in land care, cultural education, fire management, science and economic development. This story offers a rich example of the multiple benefits of combining intergenerational contact, practical activities and the opportunity to "return to country" to practice Indigenous lore and custom and involve young people more fully in the life of their community. It also demonstrates how important land-based activity, traditional culture, walking and other forms of physical animation are to youth participation with Indigenous young people.

Keywords: Aboriginal youth; youth programs; Kimberley Australia; youth participation

Introduction

While it could be said that work with young people has shifted over time, a consistent theme over the past 20 years has been the idea that the young need to be better "engaged" or to "participate" in their community. In Australia, as in most Western governmental systems, youth engagement and community participation seems to have increased across a broad range of areas, such as health promotion, education, employment, arts and cultural development, recreation and city planning (Matthews 2001; Johns et al. 2001).

Much of the Australian policy talk and practice about youth participation is littered with ideas grounded in Western (particularly liberal) social and political theory, which emphasize the centrality of equality, democracy, reciprocal influence, jointly planned activities, subsidiarity and the rights of the individual citizen. Not so popular in public discussion of youth participation is an exploration of the limits of participatory practice, particularly in relation to how it plays out in the lives of young people from non-Western backgrounds.

This paper focuses on the work of the Yiriman Project, a youth organization in the West Kimberley region of Western Australia that hosts what local people have called "back-to-country trips." It offers an account of how people from isolated communities in the north of Australia have built an organization that brings together the young, elders and other community members. Not only is the Yiriman model used as a means to have young people "participate" more fully in the life and experience of community, but it also leads to a range of other events, including young people's participation in land care, cultural education, fire management, science and economic development. This story offers a rich example of the multiple benefits of combining intergenerational contact, practical activities and the opportunity to "return to country" to practice Indigenous lore and custom and involve young people more fully in the life of their community.

The paper begins with a short discussion of the literature concerned with youth participation and intergenerational exchange in Australia. Next, it briefly describes the West Kimberley region and the cultural context in which Yiriman emerged. After outlining the aspirations of Yiriman "bosses," or elders who maintain seniority within their community, the discussion then turns to the many dimensions of the "back-to-country" approach to youth participatory practice. Finally, the paper compares the dynamics found in the Yiriman project with the features of youth participation often articulated in the literature, noting the importance that land-based activity, traditional culture, walking and other forms of physical animation play in youth participation with Indigenous young people.

Youth Participation and Intergenerational Exchange

Between the late 1970s and the International Youth Year in 1985, many Australian youth organizations promoted the benefits of participation and young people's involvement in decision-making processes (Maunders 1990; Bessant et al. 1998). The popularity of youth participation waned considerably during the 1990s, but it has re-emerged since the year 2000, this time with active government promotion of young people in civic life, community and governance (Wierenga 2003). This

follows similar trends in other western countries (Matthews 2001). In Australia, as in other parts of the world, the notion of intergenerational exchange has emerged as one way to give substance to aspirations to improve young people's involvement with older members of their community.

Although ideas about and approaches used to encourage youth participation vary, there are some common features. Most draw upon methods that could generally be described as informed by or falling under the broad rubric of Participatory Learning Analysis (PLA) or Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA). These methods are prompted by claims that top-down development or governance has serious shortcomings. The view is that externally imposed and expert-driven forms of policy and community governance have become ineffective, particularly for groups such as young people, who traditionally have poor access to decision-making processes (Cooke and Kothari 2001, 5). The central motivation of adopting participatory methods is to allow the concerns of "the people," particularly those who otherwise are marginal to decision-making, to become paramount in any attempts to plan and manage matters that affect them. Implicit in this work is the supposition that the knowledge and active involvement of "the people" will transform planning and lead to improved outcomes (Mosse 2001, 16).

Participatory methods are often characterized by liberal and modern ideas about the value of:

- equality, freedom and open fraternity;
- encouraging young people's unencumbered expression and talk;
- subsidiarity, or that power needs to be exercised from below;
- young people have the right to shape their future;
- reciprocity in the exchange of ideas, power and work;
- young people sharing similar activities with others;
- the open sharing of information between people in a community;
- freedom of access to "public space"; and
- universal human rights (Abbot et al. 1998; Chambers 1994).

Whether couched in terms of leadership, democracy or consultation, the concept of youth participation is considered important to "a process of building relationships of mutual obligation and trust across community sectors" (Johns et al. 2001, 20). The most common forms of formal participation tend to involve youth councils or youth advisory committees, as part of an attempt to get young people's input into ongoing policy direction (Saggers et al. 2004). Often, participation is seen as the cure for deeply divisive social ills, such as vandalism and concerns about young people's use of public space (Ackermans 1991; Robins 1996; White 2001).

In response to fears about the unhealthy effects of age segregation, the idea of orchestrating intergenerational exchange has emerged as a popular tool for youth practitioners. This work is perhaps best described by the International Consortium for Intergenerational Programs (established in 2000) as "social vehicles that create purposeful and ongoing exchange of resources and learning among older and younger generations" (Kaplan et al. 2002, xi). In a similar fashion, the (United

States) National Council on Aging (NCA) describes intergenerational programs as those interventions that aim to "increase cooperation, interaction or exchange between any two generations" through the "sharing of skills, knowledge or experience between old and young" (National Council on Aging, cited in Duggar 1993, 5). In other words, intergenerational programs are "activities that bring old and young together for their mutual benefit" (Angelis cited in Barton 1999, 625).

The rationale behind most of the work on intergenerational exchange centers on what Allport (1954) calls the "contact hypothesis," which posits that cooperative contact with individual members of an "out-group" – or marginalized population – can lead to a more positive attitude toward the out-group as a whole (see Caspi 1984; Hale 1998; Schwartz and Simmons 2001).

The claimed benefits of intergenerational exchange are many and varied and include the idea that they help instill important civic values in young people (Woffard 1999, 92); strengthen mutual understanding (Berns 1997); rebuild social networks and create inclusive communities (Granville and Hatton-Yeo 2002, 197); increase tolerance, a level of comfort and intimacy between the old and young; and dispel clichés and myths about the aging process (Manheimer, cited in Intergenerational Strategies 2004). Such benefits are attributed in part to the fact that intergenerational work demands that participants build common bonds and discover shared life experiences, challenges and problems (Larkin et al., cited in Intergenerational Strategies 2004).

Although there is a general acceptance of the conceptual benefits of youth participation and intergenerational exchange, they are not uncontested. Walther and colleagues note the existence of "contradictions in the concepts of participation and citizenship" (Walther et al. 2002, 3). There is some doubt about the efficacy of youth participation, and also about the potential for extended control implicit in the practice. Some believe that the practice of youth participation can be problematic and dominated by school leaders (McLaren cited in Saggers et al. 2004), or have a "hidden agenda" about the need to create "good citizens" (Stacey et al. 2002, 45). Concerns about totalitarian echoes in discourses of participation and community development and about the distance between the rhetoric of youth participation and the practices of local government have also surfaced (Palmer cited in Saggers et al. 2004; Bessant 2002 and 2003). Importantly, both youth participation and intergenerational exchange have their roots in western traditions, in the main liberal approaches to modern government. The extent to which they are applicable to work with Indigenous young people remains rather untested.

Karajarri, Nyikina, Mangala and Walmajarri Country

One example of youth practice that has some of the hallmarks of youth participation and intergenerational exchange is the Yiriman Project. The Yiriman story takes us to the Kimberley region in Australia, specifically the country of the Karajarri, Nyikina, Mangala and Walmajarri. The Kimberley, one of the many regions in the huge Australian state of Western Australia, itself covers a substantial area approximately twice the size of the Australian state of Victoria, three times the size of England or three-fifths the size of Texas. Although large in geographic size,

it has a relatively small population with just over 30,000 residents living in the region's six towns (Broome, Derby, Fitzroy Crossing, Halls Creek, Wyndham and Kununurra) and more than one hundred small Indigenous communities. The Kimberley is far removed from Australia's population centers: the towns of Broome and Kununurra are 2,000 and 3,000 kilometers, respectively, from Perth, the state's capital city.

Compared to many other regions in southern and central Australia, the Kimberley enjoys a climate of extremes. Temperatures range from close to 0°C at night in the desert to 45°C and humid in the middle of the day in summer. For those who are used to more moderate weather, the heat and humidity can get very uncomfortable (Zell 2003).

More than 40 percent of those who call the Kimberley home are of Indigenous Australian decent. Across the region, there are at least 15 language groups with 30 dialects still being spoken. Many, particularly those still living in the more remote parts of the region, have a fairly recent history of contact with non-Indigenous social and economic systems. Indeed, some parts of the Kimberley were relatively isolated from western influence (apart from the odd missionary, pastoralist or traveling police officer) until after the Second World War (Department of Indigenous Affairs 2005).

Although the history of attempted European conquest of traditional Aboriginal lands stretches back to the 1830s and 1840s, a considerable number of Karajarri, Nyikina, Mangala and Walmajarri people were able to remain in the country of their ancestors well into the latter half of the twentieth century. This occurred in large measure because of the necessity of Aboriginal labor in the pastoral industry. In return for their work, often for little or no pay, Indigenous people were able to remain in or close to their traditional lands. As a consequence of equal wages legislation in the late 1960s, many Aboriginal people were forced to leave their country and move to town areas. Often, conditions in towns saw Aboriginal people living in dire poverty, with poor health conditions and few opportunities for work and economic development (see Jebb 2003; Hawke 1990; Willis 2004).

Since the late 1970s, Indigenous leaders have sought ways to "return to country." Over the course of the last 30 years, many Indigenous people have participated in what has been called the "homelands" or "back-to-country" movement. Indeed, the homelands movement, which began in the early to mid 1970s, is continuing to see the movement of family groups from towns and large communities to smaller and more remote areas. Both literally and symbolically, Indigenous people have walked back to country (McMahon 1988; Jebb 2002; Willis 2003; Hawke 1990). This process reflects longstanding cultural practices that link the physical movement of walking (often vast distances) with the process of maintaining spiritual, economic and familial ties to country (Rose et al 2002).

Indeed, in regions such as the West Kimberley, walking on country has never really ceased or diminished in importance. Even during the most intense periods of cultural and social dislocation, when Aboriginal people were forcedly removed from

their traditional country, many were able to maintain considerable connections to it. Indeed, to talk about a complete break away from walking on country is probably a misnomer for many Karajarri, Nyikina, Mangala and Walmajarri.

However, in recent years the combined effects of better access to traditional country, a keenness to see the "old" knowledge again passed along and concerns about Indigenous young people's health and well-being has seen a resurgence in the practice of walking as a tool for the care of young people and country.

Enter the Yiriman Project

In many ways, the idea for the Yiriman Project was not particularly new for those involved. Indeed, the practice of removing troubled youth for periods of time, hunting and collecting food, meeting others, going on country with their elders, taking care of country and walking as a means of learning stories, becoming healthy, building their skills and respecting the old people has long been a critical part of life and cultural practice for the Nyikina, Mangala, Karajarri and Walmajarri. As John Watson, one the authors and founders of Yiriman says, "Walking through country has always been the way our families educate their young, hunt and collect food, meet other groups, travel to and carry out ceremonies, burn areas of land, carry out other land management practices, send messages, communicate, 'freshen up' paintings, collect and produce material culture such as tools and other implements, 'map' boundaries and collect intelligence and build knowledge" (Watson 2005, personal communication).

In 2001, the Yiriman Project was born. Eager to help young people deal with a range of social troubles or "too much humbug," a group of senior Aboriginal people turned to organizing trips "back to country" as a way to respond. Those involved were keen to find ways for young people to separate themselves from "negative influences, and reconnect with their culture in remote and culturally significant places" (Yiriman 2004a). The early plan was to establish a "drying out" center, or facility for young people with alcohol and/or drug problems, well away from the goings on of town life and have young people walking on country during their stay. Also important was the notion that young people be encouraged to get more in touch with their cultural heritage and begin to speak out themselves about their future. Indeed, in Nyikina the word "Yiriman" signifies the importance of "bringing out stories in young people." Initially, the project operated from Jalmadangah, a community about 100 kilometers southeast of Derby. After three years, the Yiriman staff moved to Derby to expand its operations and make back-to-country trips available to a greater number of communities. They have also occasionally supported similar projects in the north and east Kimberley regions.

Typically, a Yiriman trip begins when elders, young people and Yiriman workers meet to start planning. Decisions about the destination of the trip and things to do along the way are shaped by a range of factors including who is available to travel, weather conditions, the needs of local young people, local community events, when a place was last visited, the specific country and opportunities to travel with other groups. Of critical importance at this stage is the direction of the community "bosses" (senior people) who identify where and when to travel, who should go and

the activities to be undertaken. For example, at the beginning of walks on which young people are taught traditional fire management practices, it is customary for Yiriman participants to meet with senior custodians to consider where and when they should carry out the work. Discussions started with elders who passed on their direct knowledge of which areas had not been burnt by Aboriginal fire management for over 30 years.

"Back-to-country" trips can last from a couple of days to a couple of weeks, depending on the area being traveled to, the work being undertaken and the time of year. Anywhere from 12 to almost 100 people participate in the trips. Recently, 14 young men participated in a four-day trip with the Australian Quarantine Service to carry out tests on feral pigs living along the Fitzroy River. In 2003, Aboriginal elders John and Harry Watson led a 24-day trek with eight camels to carry out fire control work at the edge of the Great Sandy Desert. In July 2003, almost one hundred people, from the very youngest to the oldest walked for one week through Walmajarri country.

For those involved in the trips, the physical demands of the walk are usually arduous. The participants, young and old, often walk between 15 and 20 kilometers a day, regularly combining travel with other physically demanding tasks such as digging, hunting and collecting firewood. As the following account from the Walangkarr trek demonstrates, the demands of walking country are wide-ranging:

> *For several more days we wandered east at ambling pace, burning small patches as we went. Waking up frightfully early one morning it was a silent decision that this would be the day we set out for home. Being some 35kms away the entire camp knew what lay ahead and without a word the camp was packed, water bottles filled ... and silently we left our final camp for home ... [Later that day] as the final throes of sunlight showered the spinifex we stumbled exhausted into Mowla Bluff Station .... With 210 kilometers covered in ten days, all were exhausted beyond belief* (Yiriman 2002).

As part of this experience of traveling through country with their elders, young people take up opportunities to participate in a range of practical activities. These practical activities are often associated with taking care of country and reinvigorating Aboriginal lore and culture. Examples of the kind of activities built into Yiriman trips include land management work in Indigenous Protected Areas (IPAs), plant harvesting, fish research, quarantine work, fire management, education/training and health campaigns. On other occasions, Yiriman arranges its trips to coincide with large cultural events and meetings, such as the North Australian Indigenous Land and Sea Management Alliance Conference and the Kimberley Aboriginal Law and Culture Festival.

"Back to Country" and Youth Participation across Generations

Walking and other forms of physical activity have long been a means by which workers with young people have attempted to "engage" their charges. Indeed, since at least the 1880s, much Australian youth work practice has involved young people participating in physical activity. Influenced in large measure by Baden

Powell and the Scout and Guides groups, and the international Outward Bound movement, groups like the YMCA, Try Excelsior and the National Fitness Council have sought to incorporate adventures in rough and dangerous country in an attempt to deal with all manner of youth problems and perceived deficiencies (see Bessant et al. 1998, 79; Irving et al. 1995). Prominent in these traditions have been pseudo-fascist ideas (or at least subtly racist ideas) about the nexus between the maintenance of racial dominance, physical fitness, discipline and marching young people into the wild to tame their wild and primitive urges and tendencies.

Among such groups, the "participation" is in fitness, physical activity, healthy living, learning bush skills and discipline of the body. Much of this work consists of carefully regimented exercises and activities that help produce a self-managing subject who is able to tame nature and the primitive. Traditions of using walking as a device for work with young people also involved preparing European young people to assist in the process of colonial conquest. Bessant et al. (1998, 79) offer a sobering reminder that Baden Powell was prompted to establish the Scout movement because of his observations about the inadequacy of British young men in the arts and physical skills of war.

More recently, "wilderness therapy" has emerged as a way of working with young people. This style of intervention shares much with the European Outward Bound Movement and involves taking young people to isolated settings for personal and social development. According to Crisp (cited in Russell 2001), wilderness therapy is divided into two intervention formats: (1) wilderness base camping, which establishes a base camp with minimal equipment in an isolated environment; and (2) "expeditioning," which consists of small groups moving from place to place in a self-sufficient manner using whatever modes are appropriate and available. The wilderness therapy process is guided by three distinct phases: 1) a cleansing phase, which occurs early on in the program; 2) a personal and social responsibility phase; and 3) a transition and aftercare phase (Russell, Hendee and Phillips-Miller 2000).

The Yiriman Project may share some of these features. However, to see Yiriman walks as simply a reproduction of conventional Outward Bound work is to misinterpret its breadth and complexity. Walking on country with young people is quite different. For a start, Yiriman is not training young people to "participate" in the colonization of territory or the subjugation of the indigene. On the contrary, walking in the Yiriman model is being used as a tool in the Indigenous anti-colonial movement, with young people "participating" in a practice that helps re-establish their families and communities as the legitimate and sovereign stewards of their country.

Walking works as an important device for Yiriman in part because of the significance of country in traditional lore and custom (for example see Langton 1998; Rose 2004; Richards et al. 2002). For Karajarri, Mangala, Nyikina and Walmajarri people, country and community are inseparable. Indeed, in most Aboriginal traditions (traditions often maintained to the present) the practice of walking is literally a way of life and the way one comes to life (Muecke 1997). Rose (2004) says that in the Victoria River area of the Northern Territory, people talk

about how their country gives them body and vice-versa, so that they and the land are embedded within each other.

Also important here is the shared experience of country, particularly one that involves following in the footsteps of those who go before. As a senior Walmajarri man, Ned Cox, says of the importance of the Yiriman walks, "Kids gotta know their country, gotta walk the same way as us" (Binge 2004, 6). Cox can be understood as saying that the opportunity to follow those who have gone before is critical in the healthy incorporation of young people into their community.

Walking Along Behind **("Back to Country" and Intergenerational Exchange)**
"Back-to-country" trips also work because they offer a means of sharing the experience with elders. This is more profound than at first it may appear. Deborah Bird Rose (2004) observes that the process of walking on country for many Aboriginal people not only involves the young and their living elders "going along together," but it also demands a shared relationship with elders and ancestors long passed away. She recounts the guidance received from her friend and teacher Jessie Wirrpa, who taught her the practice of calling out to the "old people for country" – those guardians of country who had returned to their country upon dying. Wirrpa taught Rose about the need for those walking on country to be guided by the presence of ancestors who, if respected and asked for guidance, would lead and care for the living walkers. Rose (2004) describes it in this way:

> *When she took me walkabout she called out to the ancestors. She told them who we were and what we were doing, and she told them to help us. 'Give us fish', she would call out, 'the children are hungry'. When she was walking through country she was always with a group, and that group included the dead as well as the living* (167).

Important here is the conception that the dead are an integral part of the maintenance of Aboriginal life and the education and experience of the young and living. Also important here is that the Aboriginal practice of walking on country implicitly involves communion between the young (the living) and the old (the dead). There is nothing morbid about this. On the contrary, it involves what Muecke (1997, 228) describes as "paying dues" to the ancestors and respecting the cycle of life in death and death in life.

In this way, walking through country becomes a means by which young people can recognize that their place in the world is shaped by the prior existence of other beings. This practice introduces to children and young people the importance of respecting the legacy that has been left by those (both human and the inanimate environment) who came before them (Muecke 2004, 69).

Cleaning up Country **("Back to Country" and Participating in Land Care)**
Another strength of the "back-to-country" trips for Yiriman is the important part they play in land care. Karajarri, Nyikina, Mangala and Walmajarri have long considered the act of walking on country as also the act of looking after it. To put it in the reverse, to fail to walk on country is to neglect it. As April Bright, a Mak Mak

woman from the Northern Territory explains, "If you don't look after country, country won't look after you" (cited in Rose 2002, 25).

In their recently published book on the history of Worrorra care for the Wanjina, the principal creation figure and iconic symbol of North Kimberley culture depicted in rock art of the region, Blundell and Woolagoodja (2005) describe the Kimberley practice of keeping country "fresh" by visiting, walking and repainting the old Wanjina paintings. Citing Woolagoodja's father Sam, they describe in poetic detail how in Worrorra traditions, young people would be selected by their elders to accompany them on special walks to visit the sites of Wanjina, repaint these spiritual figures and "freshen-up" country and enliven the Worrorra people. For others involved in Yiriman walking on country, the purpose, particularly when it involves burning and other land care practices such as digging, hunting and harvesting, is to "clean up the country" (see Rose 2002, 22).

The nexus between walking and land care reflect long-established ontological traditions that connect the health of country to the health of persons. Rose (2002, 14) puts it beautifully when she says:

> *In Aboriginal English, the word "country" is both a common noun and a proper noun. People talk about country in the same way that they would talk about a person: they speak to country, sing to country, visit country, worry about country, grieve for country and long for country. People say that country knows, hears, smells, takes notice, takes care, and feels sorry or happy. Country is a living entity with a yesterday, a today and tomorrow, with consciousness, action, and a will toward life. Because of this richness of meaning, country is home and peace; nourishment for body, mind and spirit; and heart's ease.*

***Proper Good Walker* ("Back to Country" and Participating in Health Care)**

Walking on country – and the various practices associated with it such as burning, hunting, story telling and painting – not only "cleans up" the land. but it also "cleans up" young people and the culture of their community, keeping alive the traditions by transmitting knowledge and helping to encourage the maintenance of healthy people.

As one elder, Polly Joboy, said, "Good to have 'im bush here: to show young people for hunting, sugar bag [traditional sweet bush food] and country. Exercise is good, we need it" (cited in Yiriman 2004a). Through Yiriman walks, young people also get a first-hand experience of alternatives to their town-based ways of living. As one young man said, "There's a lot of bush tucker [food available in the bush] naturally occurring out here. You don't have to go shopping out here. You can exercise and get your feed for free." Or as another said, "I learnt about eating the right foods. Eating less sugar and start being healthy by eating bush tucker with less fat on it." As one young woman reported, "I learnt lots of things about diabetics' food and I enjoyed hunting for bush food. All the ladies had good fun walking around. They feel much better going bush" (cited in Yiriman 2004a). On the same trip another young woman learned,

> *You have to be careful at all times about babies and disease. That drugs and smoking can give you a bad future. Whatever you wanted for the future might not be there because of all those things. And to eat lots of fruit and veggies so you eat more natural sugars* (cited in Yiriman 2004a).

Of course, walking is also intrinsically helpful in maintaining and improving fitness levels and supporting healthy functioning of the body. This is of particular importance to young people living in the communities in which Yiriman operates. In these areas Indigenous life expectancy is approximately 20 years less than the life expectancy of other Australians (Western Australia Department of Health 2002). In the West Kimberley region, Indigenous people have nearly eight times the mortality rate and over 11 times the hospitalization rate in relation to diabetes, are three times more likely to suffer from circulatory problems and "by almost every [health] indicator, two or three times as poor" as non-Indigenous people (cited in Department of Indigenous Affairs 2005).

Going along Together **("Back to Country" and Participating in Community)**
Yiriman walks also work to encourage the participation of young people in the lives of their families and communities. Indeed, one of the obvious successes of the Yiriman story is the extent to which it has been led by elders and involves young people being given direct and intimate time with others in their community. While on trips, young people accompany adults, particularly elders, on hunting expeditions; are taught language by the old people; sit around the camp hearing stories of the past; look after those who are less physically able by setting up camp and collecting firewood; take care of younger children and work on other practical projects with members of their community. Quite literally, for the duration of the walks, young people will share food, warmth, stories, language and sleep on the same ground as their elders and others in the community.

As one of the Yiriman workers pointed out, walking or traveling together for a substantial period of time often encourages a deep and meaningful level of interaction among the participants. Hugh Wallace Smith (personal communication), Yiriman's coordinator, says of the depth of intimacy,

> *Often the most intense and powerful relationship building goes on while you are walking ... it brings you into a real closeness ... one of the truly great things about the Yiriman walks is that young people get to spend quality and intense time with other members of the community... communities talk about it for months afterwards.*

Indicative of this are the following two comments from young Yiriman leaders who clearly see the trips as an important way to build respectful relationships in their communities. One said, "I want to come on the next Yiriman trip, whereever you go." Another reflected, "Supporting our elders is the most important issue for young people like myself" (Yiriman Project 2005).

In keeping with traditional walking conventions of going along together, Yiriman works in league with others (often outside the immediate Indigenous community) who share a stake in land care, youth development, Indigenous lore and custom and community work. Indeed, one of the features of Yiriman's work is that they rarely arrange trips on their own, instead carefully incorporating their plans to fit in with communities and other groups who share similar interests and aims.

For example, Yiriman has worked very closely with the Kimberley Regional Fire Management Project. Indeed, one of the key project developments has been the emergence of the Fire Control Teams. Young people involved in these teams are given the opportunity to contrast western ideas about fire control and danger with Aboriginal use of fire as regenerative and life giving. Johnny Nargoodah from Jimbalakudunj community reports on the work of the fire teams. He said his team

> *mainly does firebreaks, you need to clear after the wet, which is good and when it's still green it doesn't burn real wild ... it won't jump over the next boundary. Plus it makes green for animals, kangaroo ... bring in more grasshoppers for the turkeys. They (countrymen) know when to light it and when to go hunting and what time for goanna hunting and what time for turkey hunting ... they don't just go and light a fire* (cited in Binge 2004, 8).

An additional positive upshot of the Yiriman experience has been the involvement of scientists, medical practitioners, researchers and other non-Indigenous professionals in the walks. For example, Yiriman trips have been planned to coincide and work together with research concerned with Indigenous Protected Areas (IPS), river care and fish science, fire management, Bilbies, feral animals, native plants and bush medicine. Other groups joining Yiriman walks have included representatives from the Department for Conservation and Land Management (CALM), the Kimberley Land Council, university-based scientists and researchers, Native Title Prescribed Bodies Corporate, the Kimberley Regional Fire Management Project and the Derby Aboriginal Health Service. Yiriman abounds with examples of not only intergenerational but also intercultural and, arguably, interdisciplinary exchange (for a discussion of similar work see Nesbitt et al. 2001, 191-192).

Yiriman **("Back to Country" and Participating in Story Telling)**

"Back-to-country" trips as a means for refreshing community are closely tied in with encouraging elders to tell their stories to young people. Indeed one of the reasons for establishing the Yiriman Project was to keep the old stories alive and to encourage young people to talk about their lives. On each trip, young people and their elders have many opportunities to share "stories for country."

For example, during the Oongkoor bush trip, one elder passed on stories about people's involvement in the pastoral industry: "Station manager give us flour, tea, sugar, tobacco for workin'. We go bush one week, one month. Eat bush tucker too. Not too much ... Walk all over ... even to Broome" (cited in Yiriman 2004b). This experience of story telling, the *raison de entré* for Yiriman, gives elders the chance to have their accounts listened to and young people the chance to learn.

Yiriman's success can be partly attributed to the fact that walking on country incites the telling of stories about country. It happens in this way: Yiriman walks allow the older people to revisit the haunts of their own youth and to keep their memories and stories alive. They do this by passing them on as they walk and by sharing time with young people in other activities, such as hunting and resting by the fire at night. In this way, the walks give young people an experience of country; it helps them build their own story of country. For many young people, this contrasts sharply with their experience of living in towns. The walks are often the first time they get a direct and situated experience of the country that has featured in many stories they have heard before. They, in turn, can tell the stories to future generations.

For those participating in the Yiriman trips, walking also allows one to enter a temporal zone in which the past, the present and the future are aligned through conversations and stories about the old people's experience of country. Walking is used as a medium through which the stories of the old people can come alive or have new meaning attached to them. This is because being on country while you talk about country demands the exercising of a range of sensory tools. Not only do young people listen to the accounts of their elders, but they also have their imagination enriched by the opportunity to see, touch, smell and even feel the stories. Solnit (1992) implies that perhaps the rhythm of walking also generates a kind of rhythm of thinking more amenable to poetry and storytelling.

"Back-to-country" trips therefore become a means through which young people can play an active role in the same stories their parents, grandparents and great-grandparents knew. As one field trip report testifies, the wildlife surveys and formal planning discussions the group undertook kept the young people busy but they also provided a forum for "stories" and discussion:

> *An exciting discussion between several elders about communicating to young people was one of the greatest rewards to come out of the project. ... Concerns about how they were treated at home were discussed and the need for more open and friendlier communication to occur* (Yiriman 2005, np).

***Stopping Humbug* ("Back to Country" and Participating in Respect)**

According to those involved in Yiriman, the act of "walking on country" also presents opportunities for diverting young people away from social problems, trouble or what Aboriginal people often call "humbug." Many of the funding agencies responsible for providing money to Yiriman also see it as a means of "achieving outcomes" such as "harm minimisation," "reducing alcohol and substance use," "addressing the increased incidence of youth suicide" and "a diversion from juvenile crime and anti-social behavior" (Yirman 2005, np).

From its inception, Yiriman was seen as a way of targeting young people about whom communities were most worried. This reflects the fact that young people in the Kimberley often experience profound and acute social problems. Indeed, a recent review of services to Indigenous communities in the West Kimberley identified young people in the region as amongst the most profoundly affected by

drug and alcohol use and abuse, violence, suicide and criminal activity (Department of Indigenous Affairs 2005).

Following the footsteps of their elders, Yiriman leaders like John and Harry Watson sought to take young offenders away from their lives of trouble, actively traveling to a remote setting to be surrounded by a more healthy influence where they could "dry out" and become rejuvenated. As Nathan Dolby from the Kimberley community Kupartiya concluded, taking young people back to country is important, "Cause a lot of kids have started drinking alcohol and smoking, but I don't think it's a good thing. Bring them out here to dry out. They learn hunting and how to make Aboriginal things" (cited in Binge 2004, 6). Important in this regard was the elimination of other unhealthy influences such as sugar, cool drinks and fast foods and exposing young people to conditions that place extra demands on them and extend their repertoire of experience.

At the very least, Yiriman walks take young people away from a number of activities that their elders see as unhealthy. Because of the remoteness of the destinations of Yiriman walks, often hundreds of kilometers away from towns or community life, it is not possible for young people to engage in things such as drinking, drug use, smoking and trouble with the law for the duration of the journey. In particular, those who suffer from family violence are, for the duration of the walks, away from the conditions that put them in the firing line of perilous adults.

Yiriman and Participating in Country

Behind much of the literature concerned with the practice of youth participation is the notion that it involves aspirations for equality, open and free expression and association, subsidiarity, youth self government, young people's rights to participate in all elements of community life and individual autonomy. However, as Saggers et al. (2004) remind us, in fact there is considerable diversity in the practice of youth participation. There are differences in relation to the philosophy, rationale for participation, methods chosen, targets for intervention, institutional context and levels of involvement. There is also often considerable distance between the claims made for things such as subsidiarity and what people actually do. Indeed, to suggest that there is a single practice in relation to youth participation would be remiss.

Likewise, in no way is it fair to conclude that there exists a unified practice of youth participation with Indigenous Australians. Having said this, it is worth making three observations about Yiriman's attempts to encourage youth involvement in the life of their community.

The first and perhaps most unique part of Yiriman's program for youth "participation" is the importance of country. Yiriman's work happens in distinct physical locations tied to cultural and community ancestry and traditions. The work involves travel "on country" and is called "back-to-country trips." Much of the activities that occur involve various forms of "land care." Indeed, the word Yiriman

stands for "bringing out young people's stories" – an act that involves speaking on country, about country and in relation to country.

Among Aboriginal Australians, talking about and doing "community" is inseparable from country. As Rose (2004, 153) explains, for Aboriginal people, country is multidimensional, consisting of an intimacy among people, animals, plants, knowledge, underground, earth, water, air and food. She suggests that living things associated with country have familial relationships such that "they take care of their own." Rose (2004) also discusses the temporal dimensions of country, pointing out that it has ancient origins and holds the future as well as carrying the present. Importantly for Yiriman, this means that to participate in country is to follow along in a generational legacy that sees young people taking part in the country of their descendants both living and passed on. To "participate" in any kind of planning, community building or social action is a meaningless undertaking if one is abstracted from country. Work with, on and part of country is literally embodied in Karajarri, Nyikina, Mangala and Walmajarri culture and life.

Another important observation about Yiriman's work is that it is not always premised on western and liberal notions of government. Western concepts, such as equality, open decision-making, the pre-eminence of the individual, subsidiarity, sharing involvement in everything, immediate reciprocity and youth rights to complete independence are dominant in Yiriman's work. At least some of the time, the Yiriman story is a story about senior cultural "bosses" who deciding what groups should do. Often more important for Yiriman is following traditional cultural practices in which selected and culturally appointed people make central decisions about the organization. For example, the premise behind "back-to-country" trips is to return to areas important to senior leaders, often referred to as the "old people." It demands that young people "walk along behind." However, this is not to suggest that young people simply follow in an obedient and submissive fashion. Nor is it to suggest that adults lack respect for young people. Rather, the practice demands that those who follow be invited to share in an inheritance with those who have come before. Routinely in Yiriman's work, young people are encouraged to "stand up" and take on leadership. Indeed, to participate in a Yiriman trip involves taking a great share in decisions, in work, in storytelling and in shaping the collective experience of others on the trip (see Walsh and Mitchell 2002). Perhaps one way to describe this might be to note that Yiriman acknowledges that senior people are "bosses" while young people are encouraged to take on "leadership."

The Yiriman leadership and organizational structure has been observed in other work with Indigenous young people elsewhere in the world. According to Kaplan and colleagues (2002), cultural resurgence taking place with many Indigenous Hawaiian groups is premised upon a great deal of youth participation and intergenerational contact. However, it is emphasizing traditional cultural heritage and values rather than seeking to provide participants of different age groups with "equal" rights and voices.

The third feature of the style of youth participation found in Yiriman's work worth mentioning is the importance of walking and animation. In contrast with many of

the conventional approaches used in Australia, "back-to-country trips" see young people active while participating. The standard devices for enlisting youth participation, including youth advisory councils, youth roundtables, youth forums, youth consultations and various youth committees, are quite different from what Yiriman does. Often, these participation devices have young people taking time away from active pursuits and adopting the rather sedentary posture of "sitting" on committees. One danger of relying exclusively on such methods is that they tend to immobilize young people. This is not to imply that good work cannot occur in meetings, that virtual and "real-time" contact has to occur, or even that youth do not benefit from sitting on councils or committees, or even doing nothing for a long time. Indeed, on Yiriman trips, some of the work happens in meetings, sitting around the fire and quietly being still and listening.

As mentioned earlier, much of the power of "back-to-country trips" comes from the fact that young people become physically active. This style of youth practice does not simply rely on verbal, intellectual or symbolic participation abstracted from the operations of the life of the community. Young people not only talk about themselves, their community and the future; they literally embody the work of community. As Hokari (2005) reiterates, in part this is because the art of knowing and paying attention often happens most powerfully when moving or becoming animated. Walking, hunting, burning, driving, collecting and other work on country "fundamentally relates the machinery of the body to a country" (Muecke 1997, 195).

Conclusion

We can trace the etymology of "participation" to its Latin roots. According to the Collins English Dictionary, *pars* comes from the sixteenth century Latin, meaning "part of," while *capere* means "to take." *Pars capere* is then to take part in or, perhaps more consistent with its initial use, to become or make oneself a part of something. In this way *pars capere* involves the act of embodiment.

For those responsible for the future of the Karajarri, Nyikina, Mangala and Walmajarri, to "participate" or take part in the life of the community necessitates "participating" or taking part in country. To take part is to return to country in an embodied way. In other words, active participation literally and metaphorically involves actively becoming a part of country. To make this possible, young people have to "walk along behind" those who have come before, following the lore and custom of their forebears while they travel and visit the places of importance to their community.

In contrast to many who are adopting the mantra of youth participation, those creating the Yiriman Project have chosen to encourage young people to go "back to country." Like their parents and grandparents before them, elders are encouraging young people to "go along behind" them. The device of walking and traveling on country has become a means through which young people share time with their community, build respect for elders, maintain culture and language, learn to care for land, stay healthy and start to take a stake in their future. Or as Yiriman staff and youth so clearly put it, trips on country help young people "participate" because

they engage young people in "goin' the same way as us," "walkin' along behind," "learnin' to freshen up," "building stories together" and "stopping humbug." In this way, walking on country is being used as a way to build young people's strength in physical and symbolic ways so they can take an active role in leading their communities.

Perhaps Yiriman's work then provides a reminder that those working with Indigenous young people, particularly those who adopt participation as a rhetorical tool, ought to consider the parts "country," cultural practice and physical animation play in the future of their community.

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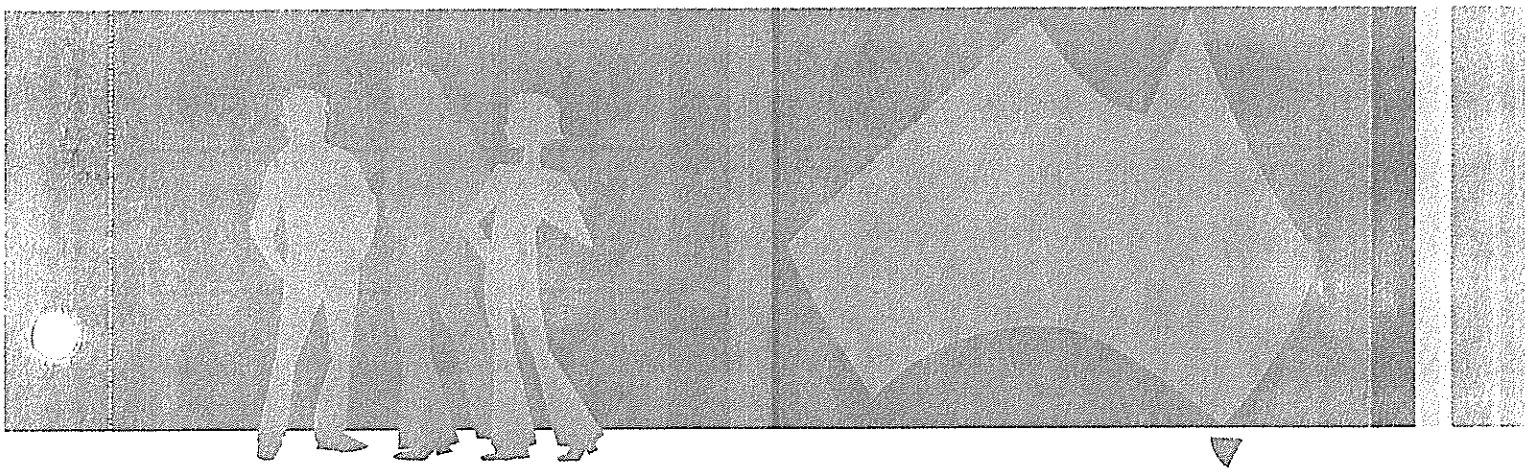
NATIONAL

AFFAIRS
RESEARCH
SCHEME

COMMUNITY BUILDING THROUGH INTERGENERATIONAL EXCHANGE PROGRAMS

REPORT TO THE NATIONAL YOUTH AFFAIRS RESEARCH SCHEME (NYARS)



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THE NATIONAL YOUTH AFFAIRS RESEARCH SCHEME (NYARS) was established in 1985 as a co-operative funding arrangement between the Australian, State and Territory Governments to facilitate nationally based research into current social, political and economic factors affecting young people. The Scheme operates under the auspices of the Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs (MCEETYA).

NYARS reports published since the early 1990s are available free-of-charge on the website of the Australian Government Department responsible for youth affairs. At the time this report was published, the website address was: http://www.facs.gov.au/internet/facsinternet.nsf/aboutfacs/programs/youth-nyars.htm

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

INTRODUCTION

Initiatives designed to support young people's engagement, participation and civic involvement with community have grown in popularity in Australia over the past decade. In part, this is because of the perceived growth in young people's social problems, issues and needs and the fact that these are seen as a reflection of their declining levels of inclusion in civic life, a loss in community, a failure on the part of local associations to encourage social cohesion at the local level and a growing distance between the generations. Intergenerational practice has emerged as one general approach that may help put substance to aspirations for bringing young people into closer contact with others in their community.

The 'Community Building through Intergenerational Exchange Programs' research project was commissioned by the National Youth Affairs Research Scheme (NYARS) to explore the concept of intergenerational exchange as a vehicle for community building, particularly in Australia.

THE RESEARCH

The specific objectives of the project were to:

- identify a definition of intergenerational programs and relevant associated concepts, briefly exploring each element, particularly as they relate to current approaches to working with young people, in both a policy and program context;

- identify the benefits of intergenerational programs to both the individuals involved and the broader community;
- explore the difficulties that may have arisen in the implementation of intergenerational programs and how these factors may impact on program delivery;
- explore how factors such as gender and/or cultural background may enhance the exchange between generations, particularly Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islander and culturally and linguistically diverse communities;
- identify, analyse and discuss the factors that constitute good or best practice intergenerational program model[s]; and
- explore the relationship between intergenerational programs and the potential to foster and develop resilience, enhance social connection and interactions and build both individual and community capacity.

For the purpose of this research, the focus was on intergenerational exchange in the context of activities that operate within organised programs rather than informal activities in which different generations participate as part of their daily lives. Although intergenerational programs may involve children and young people as the younger generation, this research, as part of the National Youth Affairs Research Scheme, focuses on young people 12–25 years of age.

To achieve the research objectives, a combination of qualitative methodologies was employed. These included:

- consultation with NYARS and obtaining ethics clearance;
- review of the international literature related to intergenerational exchange programs;
- consultation with experts, including young people and older people through focus groups and in-depth interviews;
- field visits to selected sites; and
- data analyses and writing.

DEFINING INTERGENERATIONAL EXCHANGE

Most of the literature demonstrates that the idea of intergenerational exchange is relatively new in Australia. Although the practice of bringing the old and young together for mutual benefit has long been an important element of traditional family processes and part of youth and community practice in this country, the notion of 'intergenerational exchange' is still quite new in Australia. In fact, for most it is a novel or unfamiliar concept. The literature points to the idea as something that has been imported, initially from the United States and most recently from the United Kingdom and Europe. However, intergenerational exchange appears to be on the rise. Indeed at the beginning of this research there was little discussion of intergenerational exchange in the Australian literature. During the course of the project this began to change with Australian researchers beginning to publish work on the practice, and an international conference planned for mid-2006.

The review of literature identified a number of key features of intergenerational exchange as it is understood and applied. In particular, it was established that the notion of intergenerational exchange is most often associated with a relationship of mutually beneficial exchange and cooperation across generational groups. Additionally intergenerational practice occurs on a variety of levels, including intimate or strong attachments between two individuals through to diverse, thinner and bridging relationships involving a complex network of connections.

Literature reviewed also identified a large range of outcomes from intergenerational practice for young people, old people and the broader community. For individuals, these included increases in self worth, less loneliness and isolation, new connections and friendships, academic improvements and more positive perceptions of other generations. For the broader community, benefits include the building of social networks, greater diversity of contact, breaking down of stereotypes, and enhancing of culture in particular communities.

In addition, this research helped build a more nuanced understanding of the notion of intergenerational exchange. The following table represents the research findings in this regard.

Table 1: Understandings of intergenerational practice

Intergenerational practice involves exchange between multiple generations:
• Purposeful and ongoing exchange of resources and ideas • Increasing co-operation or exchange between two or more generations • Bringing different generations together for mutual benefit • In practice, exchange is multi-generational with a range of involvement of others • Exchange can involve mutuality and reciprocity
Intergenerational practice involves engagement and participation at a range of levels:
• The concept implies interaction, action and awareness • Increasing levels of interaction, engagement and participation are evident alongside mutual learning with negotiated, shared and unanticipated outcomes • A range of engagement forms were evident including 'acting on', 'sharing' and 'learning with'
Intergenerational practice has a range of intended and unanticipated outcomes:
• Identifying and harnessing the experiences of each age group to enhance the life experiences of the other • Developing understanding of the life experiences of other generations • Participating in and making culture • Bringing generations together to foster change in skills, behaviour, and attitudes
Intergenerational practice happens in a range of formal and informal spaces:
• Schools and educational institutions • Voluntary and community groups • Indigenous communities • Local government • Sporting clubs • Churches, ethnic and cultural development groups

THE CASE STUDIES

The research team carried out detailed case study research on four Australian projects. These included: the Bankstown Oral History Project in the inner western suburbs of Sydney, the 'Radio Holiday' Project run by Big hART in rural and remote Tasmania, the School Volunteer Program based in Perth, and the Yiriman Project based in the Kimberley region of Western Australia.

The Bankstown Oral History Project, implemented by the Bankstown Youth Development Service (BYDS) has involved three separate oral history projects in Bankstown since 1990. In each project, high school students interviewed people from other generations, most of whom they had never met before. Students were recruited from local schools, and trained in interview and transcription skills. Individual students or pairs of students were matched to a local person, and conducted an interview that touched on different aspects of the person's life. The stories were written up by the students and published by BYDS. Each publication was then launched at a public function, which was attended by participants, other community members and visitors. The project made a valuable contribution to community building in a variety of ways. These included the interaction between students when preparing for interviews, the engagement between community members of different generations through the interviews, the breaking down of stereotypes, new and renewed contact between neighbours and family members, and the sharing of the stories of participants in publications, theatre and community functions.

In the 'Radio Holiday' project, delivered by Big hART, young people have been recruited to inquire into the disappearing 'shack communities' of the north-west and western coast of Tasmania. Young people were recruited through schools, community colleges and youth centres. These young people were trained and mentored in interview skills, use of recording equipment and art-based processes in order to collect the stories of older community members in these remote communities. These stories and locations were used as a basis for the development of performance, film, visual art, and a series of radio plays that were then broadcast through ABC radio. In addition, a performance tour of this stage of the project was developed that was performed for the benefit of the shack communities involved and for the 'Ten days on the Island' festival. The benefits of the project include capacity building within communities to design and develop future projects that address relevant community issues, opportunities for young people to experiment with different modes of learning, the development of intergenerational understanding between older and younger Tasmanians, and mentoring this particular demographic of young people to develop technical, personal and social skills.

The Yiriman Project started out because Aboriginal elders in the West Kimberley were worrying for their young people. Following long established traditions, they set up an organisation that would help take young people, elders and other members of the community on trips to country. The destination and major activities planned for the trips are the product of a complex set of decisions that reflect a number of contingencies including: who is available to travel, weather conditions, the needs of young people being chosen to participate, local community events, when a place was last visited, the needs of country (e.g. fire management and burning needs) and whether there are opportunities to travel with other groups. Of critical importance at this stage is the direction of the senior people or 'bosses' who identify where and when to travel, who should go and the activities to be undertaken. Yiriman arranges its trips to coincide with large cultural events and meetings, and to build in training and development opportunities, and to work together with other organisations. These 'trips on country' become a means through which young people share time with their community, build respect for elders, maintain culture and language, learn to care for land, stay healthy and start to take a stake in their future.

The School Volunteer Program Inc. is a non-profit organisation that aims to promote intergenerational exchange between school age young people, from kindergarten to Year 12, and volunteer mentors, who are mainly seniors or retired citizens. The core program involves volunteer mentors interacting with students on a one-on-one basis for at least one school term (ten weeks). Other programs run by SVP include an attendance monitoring program and computer learning program linking students and older people. Over time, the role of volunteer mentors was adapted, with mentors who had originally focused on tutoring in the area of academic difficulties, beginning to support children more broadly in relation to issues such as self-esteem and life skills. The school mentoring program has utilised the abilities of thousands of senior and retired people to guide an equal number of students identified as at-risk of coping with the demands of school.

TURNING TO THE OLD PEOPLE AND RETURNING TO COUNTRY: THE YIRIMAN PROJECT AND INTERGENERATIONAL EXCHANGE*

*In collaboration with John Watson, Anthony Watson, Peter Ljubic, Hugh Wallace-Smith and Mel Johnson.

Background

The Yiriman Project started out because Aboriginal elders in the West Kimberley were worrying for their young people. In particular, they were concerned about young people who were harming themselves with drugs and 'grog' and getting in trouble with the law. Following long established traditions, they set up an organisation that would help take young people, elders and other members of the community on trips to country. According to those involved, they needed to turn to the old people for their wisdom and return to country to help build stories, strength and resilience in young people.

Initially, the project was operating from Jalmadangah, a community some 100 kilometres south east of Derby. After three years, staff moved to Derby to expand its operations and make available Yiriman trips to a greater number of communities. So far, Yiriman has been working with the Karajarri, Nyikina, Mangala and Walmajarri people, who comprise four Indigenous Australian language groups or cultural blocks in the West Kimberley region. Occasionally they also support similar projects in the north and east Kimberley.

The Region

The area Yiriman serves is enormous. Indeed, the Kimberley is approximately twice the size of Victoria, three times the size of England or three-fifths the size of Texas. Although a large geographical mass, it has a relatively small population with just over 30,000 residents living in six towns (Broome, Derby, Fitzroy Crossing, Halls Creek, Wyndham and Kununurra) and over a hundred small Indigenous communities. The Kimberley is also very remote from the rest of Australia, with Derby approximately 2500 kilometres from Perth.

Compared to many other regions in southern and eastern Australia, the Kimberley enjoys a climate of extremes, from hot and humid weather in the summer or 'wet' to cold evenings in the winter or 'dry'. During the dry, the sky is blue with warm to hot days, cool nights and no rain. However, during the wet, landscape and life change considerably. Cyclonic storms race through the region dropping enormous amounts of rain. Aggressive rains regularly cause flooding and a build up of water, particularly around the Fitzroy Valley region. For those who are unprepared, the heat, humidity and water can present dangerous hazards.

Those who established Yiriman have always called this part of the world their country. Typically science has conceptualised this as at least 40–60,000 years. It is certainly the case that evidence exists of human occupation stretching back further than ancient European times, with some of the oldest art work on record being found in the region (Zell, 2003).

The history of European colonisation in the Kimberley stretches back to the 1830s and 40s. Since this time there has been enormous disruption and dislocation experienced by Aboriginal people, many of whom were forced to leave their traditional lands. However, many Karajarri, Nyikina, Mangala and Walmajarri people have been able to remain in or close to the country of their ancestors until very recent times. This was made possible in part because of the value of their labour in the pastoral industry.

Project development and implementation

The history of Yiriman

In some ways, the idea for the Yiriman Project was not particularly new for those involved. The practice of taking young people away from their troubles, going on country with their elders and walking as a means for learning stories, becoming healthy, building their skills and respecting the old people, has long been a critical part of life and cultural practice for Nyikina, Mangala, Karajarri and Walmajarri. As John Watson one of the founders of Yiriman says, "walking through country has always been the way our families educate their young, hunt and collect food, meet other groups, travel to and carry out ceremonies, burn areas of land, carry out other land management practices, send messages, communicate, 'freshen up' paintings, collect and produce material culture such as tools and other implements, 'map' boundaries and collect intelligence and build knowledge".

Although the idea had been discussed for some years, in 2001 the Yiriman Project was formally established. Those involved were keen to find ways for young people to stop 'humbugging', what others might call separating themselves from "negative influences, and reconnect with their culture in remote and culturally significant places" (Yiriman, 2004a). Initially the plan was to establish a "drying out" centre well away from the goings on of town life and have young people walk on country during their stay. For a range of reasons (in large part to encourage the involvement of many communities across the vast areas within Karajarri, Nyikina, Mangala and Walmajarri country), Yiriman work has not fixed itself to one location. Rather, most Yiriman work has involved organising trips to country with elders and young people going along together.

What happens on a Yiriman trip?

Typically a Yiriman trip begins when elders and Yiriman workers meet to start planning. The destination and major activities planned are the product of a complex set of decisions that reflect a number of contingencies including: who is available to travel, weather conditions, the needs of young people being chosen to participate, local community events, when a place was last visited, the needs of country (e.g. fire management and burning needs) and whether there are opportunities to travel with other groups. Of critical importance at this stage is the direction of the senior people or 'bosses' who identify where and when to travel, who should go and the activities to be undertaken. For example, at the beginning of one fire walk that involved twenty young men travelling a distance of over sixty kilometres, the Yiriman team met with senior custodians to consider where and when they should carry out the trip. Discussions started with elders who passed on their direct knowledge of which areas had not been burnt by Aboriginal fire management for over thirty years.

Typically a Yiriman trip lasts between a couple of days to a couple of weeks, depending on the area being travelled to, the work being undertaken and the time of the year. Anywhere from between a dozen to almost a hundred people participate in the trips. Recently 14 young men participated in a short four-day trip organised by Yiriman with the Australian Quarantine Service to carry out tests on feral pigs living along the Fitzroy River. In 2003, Aboriginal elders John and Harry Watson led a 24-day trek with eight camels to carry out fire control work at the edge of the Great Sandy Desert. In July 2003, almost one hundred people, from the very youngest to the oldest, walked for one week through Walmajarri country.

An important part of the Yiriman trips is the experience of walking. Indeed, walking has a range of functions for Yiriman. It is one means by which young people can be taken out of town and exposed to a very different environment to reconnect with their elders, Aboriginal culture and the land of their family. It is also one way of diverting young people's attention from drugs and alcohol, anti-social activities and general unhealthy life or what many in the Kimberley call 'humbug'. As Nathan Dolby from the Kimberley community Kupartiya concluded, taking young people on country was important "cause a lot of kids have started drinking alcohol and smoking, but I don't think it's a good thing. Bring them out here to dry out. They learn hunting and how to make Aboriginal things" (cited in Binge, 2004, p. 6).

For those involved in Yiriman trips, the physical demands of the walk are often arduous. Often young people walk between fifteen and twenty kilometres a day, regularly combining travel with other physically demanding tasks such as digging, hunting and collecting firewood. As the following account from the Walangkarr trek demonstrates, the demands of walking country are wide-ranging.

> *For several more days we wandered east at ambling pace, burning small patches as we went. Waking up frightfully early one morning it was a silent decision that this would be the day we set out for home, Being some 35kms away the entire camp knew what lay ahead and without a word the camp was packed, water bottles filled, emptied then filled...and silently we left out final camp for home...[later that day] as the final throws of sunlight showered the spinifex we stumbled exhausted into Mowla Bluff Station...With 210 kilometres covered in ten days, all were exhausted beyond belief. (Yiriman, 2002)*

Walking is also important because it is something that many of the old people have memories of themselves. John Watson, one of the senior people instrumental in establishing and building Yiriman, had received much of his early instruction in Nyikina and Mangala culture as well as pastoral work while participating in walks (Marshall, 1988). Another elder Ned Cox recalled, "when I was a young fulla I was proper real good walker, I was there takin the lead when I was a young man...I been good walking all the way" (Binge, 2004, p. 6).

As part of this experience of travelling through country with their elders, young people are given opportunities to participate in a range of practical activities. These practical activities are often associated with taking care of country and reinvigorating Aboriginal lore and culture. Examples of the kind of activities built into Yiriman trips include land management work in Indigenous Protected Areas (IPAs), 'back to country' visits where native plant harvest, commercial investigations and cultural heritage work occurs, and Rivercare/Fish Scientist field trips where young people and elders accompany scientists on research investigations on the Fitzroy River. On other occasions, Yiriman arranges its trips to coincide with large cultural events and meetings such as the North Australian Indigenous Land and Sea Management Alliance Conference and the Kimberley Aboriginal Law and Culture Festival.

Many of the trips are planned to build in training and development opportunities and work together with other organisations. One example has been the close cooperation between Yiriman and the Kimberley Regional Fire Management Project. Travelling together, staff from both organisations work with young people to teach them how to burn country using traditional and modern burning techniques. Much of this occurs in conjunction with pastoral stations with young people learning how to grade fire-breaks, manage fire, carry out control burns, research the effect of burning on plants and animals, produce electronic maps and document their work.

Young people involved in these teams are given the opportunity to contrast western ideas about fire control and danger with Aboriginal use of fire as regenerative and life giving. Johnny Nargoodah from the Jimbalakudunj community reports on this work.

He said the teams, "mainly does firebreaks, you need to clear after the wet, which is good and when it's still green it doesn't burn real wild...it won't jump over the next boundary. Plus it makes green for animals, kangaroo...bring in more grasshoppers for the turkeys. They (countrymen) know when to light it and when to go hunting and what time for goanna hunting and what time for turkey hunting...they don't just go and light a fire" (cited in Kantri Laif, 2004, p. 8).

Through Yiriman walks, young people also get a first hand experience of alternatives to their town-based ways of living. As one young person recounted:

> *There's a lot of bush tucker out here. You don't have to go shopping out here you can exercise and get your feed for free. (cited in Yiriman, 2004a)*

Or as another said:

> *I learnt about eating the right foods. Eating less sugar and start being healthy by eating bush tucker with less fat on it. (cited in Yiriman, 2004a)*

This experience of country and traditional culture is combined with learning about healthy living and smart eating. Combined with activities to promote care of country are talks about such things as sexual health, diet and other health problems. Often in these settings the young and seniors learn things together and from each other. As one young woman reported:

> *I learnt lots of things about diabetics' food and I enjoyed hunting for bush food. All the ladies had good fun walking around. They feel much better going bush. (cited in Yiriman, 2004a)*

On the same trip another young woman learnt:

> *...you have to be careful at all times about babies and disease. That drugs and smoking can give you a bad future. What ever you wanted for the future might not be there because of all those things. And to each lots of fruit and veggies so you eat more natural sugars. (cited in Yiriman, 2004a)*

Implications for community building

Perhaps in contrast to many who are adopting the mantra of intergeneration exchange, those creating the Yiriman Project have chosen to encourage young people to walk. Like their parents and grandparents before them, elders are taking young people back to country to "go along behind" them. Thus, the device of walking on country has become a means through which young people share time with their community, build respect for elders, maintain culture and language, learn to care for land, stay healthy and start to take a stake in their future. Or as Yiriman folk so clearly put it, trips on country help young people and their elders "goin along the same way", "walkin' along behind", "learnin to clean up", "yiriman" and "stop humbug". In this way walking on country is being used as a means to build young people's strength in physical and symbolic ways so they can take an active role in leading their communities. As a number of senior Yiriman people who want the best for their young people have said "them fullas our future...no more carryin...they bin walkin all the way".