

PIONEER CEMETERY — ABORIGINAL GRAVESITE RELOCATION — FITZROY CROSSING

**559. Dr A.D. BUTI to the Minister for Aboriginal Affairs:**

I refer to the remains of Aboriginal people that have been discovered in Fitzroy Crossing, some of which are at risk of being destroyed by erosion of the Fitzroy River. Can the minister update the house on what the government is doing to save and protect these remains?

**Mr B.S. WYATT replied:**

I thank the member for Armadale for some notice of the question.

Those who travel to Fitzroy Crossing will no doubt be familiar with the Pioneer Cemetery. Many of the gravesites that are identified are non-Aboriginal. A long time ago, over many years when a lot of Aboriginal people died, they were effectively dumped in the vicinity of the Pioneer Cemetery. Some of those gravesites were marked by their family at the time but, over time, by and large, have not been. Recently, particularly with the big wet just gone in the Kimberley, because the Pioneer Cemetery is on the banks on the western side of the Fitzroy River, erosion has pushed into the footprint of that cemetery, which is basically crown land. Terribly sadly, a number of bones have been uncovered. Some were washed away, to the great distress, of course, of the local community. As a government, we therefore found several hundred thousand dollars to ensure we could work with the local community to exhume those bones to be buried more appropriately, in consultation with the elders and the local community. We are working with the Bunuba Rangers and the Kimberley Aboriginal Law and Culture Centre as we go about this process. A smoking ceremony was held last week. The work is happening now and will be undertaken and completed before the next wet season, which is not far beyond us, because we do not want to see more of those bones washed away in the event of another large wet.

As members will appreciate, this has caused the local community some great distress because, ultimately, we are talking about 65 or 80 bodies, as we go through this process. It is certainly something I was keen to see done with great respect and, of course, with the involvement of KALCC, the Bunuba Rangers and the local elders to ensure we relocate those bodies more appropriately and with the respect they certainly were not given at the time they were buried. I want to thank the Bunuba Rangers and the local community for working with the government and with the department during what has been a traumatic time to deliver a very, very good outcome, I think, and hopefully bring some closure for the spirits of those people we lost so long ago, in many cases. Hopefully, they can rest easy.