

MOWANJUM FESTIVAL

Statement

HON PETER FOSTER (Mining and Pastoral) [6.41 pm]: During the winter recess, I was invited to travel north in my electorate to Derby to attend the opening of the Mowanjum Museum with my colleagues Hon Rosetta Sahanna and the member for Kimberley, who is here in the chamber. I was invited to attend the Mowanjum Festival the following day with the member for Kimberley and the Minister for Aboriginal Affairs. It was particularly special for me as the event fell during NAIDOC week. It was a privilege to attend the opening of the brand-new Mowanjum Museum.

The McGowan Labor government, through Lotterywest and the Department of Planning, Lands and Heritage, has been a major supporter of both the festival and the newly opened museum. This project has been driven and guided by the Mowanjum community since its inception, and as a result of their vision and years of hard work that has produced a truly unique cultural experience.

The museum will be a means for the three language groups—Worrorra, Ngarinyin and Wunambal peoples—to share their culture in a positive and proactive way. The Mowanjum Museum is a unique cultural experience, featuring interactive exhibits, displays and projections. A community-driven project, the museum has been guided by cultural advisers from the community over many years. The museum contains historic artefacts, a cave recreation of rock art, and valuable information about the importance of cultural sites and country.

The following day, I attended the Mowanjum Festival. Hosted by the Mowanjum Aboriginal Art and Culture Centre, this festival celebrates the vibrant culture of the Worrorra, Ngarinyin and Wunambal peoples. It is one of Australia's longest-running festivals of Indigenous culture, having begun in 1997, and has gone on to become a roaring success, attracting visitors from all over WA.

Works created in the Mowanjum community have become globally renowned. Worrorra elder Donny Woolagoodja's depiction of the Wandjina Namarali was seen all over the world when it featured prominently in the opening ceremony of the Sydney Olympics in 2000. The festival also acts as a bridge between current and future Mowanjum artists, nurturing the talent and creativity of younger community members.

The Worrorra, Ngarinyin and Wunambal people were removed from their northern homelands to Kunmunya Presbyterian mission in the early twentieth century before being relocated a second time to Wotjulum, near Yampi Sound. They were eventually settled on Nyigina country near Derby, known as old Mowanjum, before being moved yet again in 1975 to their present location east of Derby, off the Gibb River–Wyndham Road, to present day Mowanjum. The word Mowanjum means “settled at last”.

That is where the Mowanjum Aboriginal Art and Culture Centre stands. It performs a vital role for the Mowanjum community, connecting all three language groups with their homelands through continued cultural and ceremonial practice, visits to sacred sites, and community workshops. Traditional song and dance—junba—is a focal point for the festival, serving several important roles for the three language groups. As well as a form of storytelling, it is considered good for social and emotional wellbeing. It strengthens connection to country as well as intergenerational bonds; in the lead-up to the festival, older people in the tribes help young people to prepare totems and costumes, and practice junba with them. This year, the festival was even more special than usual for two reasons. Firstly, it marked the festival's return after, like so many significant cultural events the world over, it was cancelled in 2020. Secondly, the festival was a sellout. Everything that the Mowanjum community has achieved around it is a great success story from the Mining and Pastoral Region. Seeing the junba performed under the stars and witnessing the cultural workshops such as ochre painting and damper making was an immersive experience. It was beautiful seeing the young dancers from the Wananami Remote Community School who took to the stage for the first time to share two stories with the audience.

I thank the Mowanjum Aboriginal Art and Culture Centre and the Worrorra, Ngarinyin and Wunambal peoples for their generosity in sharing that experience with me.

I also want to note in my member's statement that today, 4 August, is National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children's Day. On this day, we honour and celebrate the importance of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children within family and community. This year's theme is “proud in culture, strong in spirit” and I want to particularly reflect on this point as it was great to see all the Mowanjum community, including the children, proudly and strongly together sharing their stories through art, song and dance. Pete O'Connor, one of the Mowanjum dancers, who I had the pleasure of meeting following the junba, was quoted in the *Broome Advertiser*. He said —

“It is a whole journey for the organisation of the festival getting the kids ready, getting them excited for the festival, getting them happy to be dancing and making sure they perform well so the old people and the ancestors are happy, and the country is happy.”

Thank you.