

Case Study

Supporting Lirrwil Yolngu Tourism Aboriginal Corporation



Background

Lirrwil Yolngu Tourism Aboriginal Corporation aims to create a tourism economy for Arnhem Land through the development and promotion of homeland destinations to national and international markets. Lirrwil provides low-impact, quality cultural tourism experiences. The overarching objective of the corporation is “to help Yolngu people right across Arnhem Land to create their own businesses” and to assist Yolngu people to stay connected with their land. Timmy Djawa Burrawanga, Chairman of Lirrwil Yolngu Tourism Aboriginal Corporation, explains, “Our land is our life, our true connection to who we are”.

As it represents many different homelands, Lirrwil’s role is complex. There are a number of factors influencing the success of their operations, including:

- Development of robust relationships
- Strong leadership and management
- Development of a united brand for Arnhem Land
- Creation of a single point of reference for consumers
- Recognising each homeland will move into tourism gradually
- The time required for individual homeland businesses to grow and become more independent
- Flexibility in case of unexpected disruptions.

The model that accommodates all these considerations is based on the concept of ‘Yothu Yindi’ or ‘mother and child’, with Lirrwil as the mother and the homelands as the child. This model is articulated in their 20 year Tourism Masterplan¹.

Lirrwil is responsible for bookings, transport, camping facilities and financial assistance, while the Yolngu people from the homelands focus on delivering a unique experience. For Lirrwil to continue to attract investment it is critical that the individual homeland businesses have good governance.

While developing the Tourism Masterplan, stakeholders agreed the homelands would need to incorporate as Aboriginal Corporations, as suitable structures for large family units making joint decisions. It was further agreed that the corporations should register under the *Corporations (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander) Act 2006* (CATSI Act). Under the CATSI Act, laws governing Indigenous corporations have been modernised while still retaining special measures to meet Indigenous peoples’ needs.

Despite the growth in capability and the gradual move towards increased independence, homelands still require external expertise and support. Lirrwil is a small but growing organisation with limited resources. The general office and financial administration is time consuming and reduces the manager’s ability to assist the homelands in their next phase of development, in areas such as governance, compliance, financial management and business planning. Lirrwil recognises the essential role that Jawun secondees play in their Tourism Masterplan.

¹ Available at <http://www.lirrwiltourism.com.au>

Maintaining momentum is critical in establishing individual homeland corporations. To date two Jawun secondees and one Jawun alumni volunteer have provided almost continuous support to five key homelands.

Approach

Wendy Schwerin from the Australian Taxation Office initially worked with Bukudal, Bawaka and Birany Birany in June and July 2014 to establish appropriate governance structures that would allow them to register with the Office of the Registrar of Indigenous Corporations (ORIC). She also created templates and master files for work that will continue over several years.

In August 2014 Wendy Brook Davis (Jawun alumnus from NAB) continued this work and successfully finalised the registration process. Wendy also worked with the local Westpac branch to help the leaders from these homelands set up bank accounts requiring several signatories and 100-point checks.

Lizzie Reid, a CBA secondee, commenced with Lirrwi during Wendy Brook Davis' final week, enabling an in-depth handover. Lizzie started the process of ORIC registration with Wandawuy and commenced the next phase of work with the four existing corporations, including compliance checklists and drafting an MOU that articulated how they would work with Lirrwi. She also assisted a number of individuals to apply for Ochre cards, the Northern Territory Working with Children accreditation.

All three Jawun secondees quickly recognised the need to build strong relationships and establish trust with the elders in the homelands. Effective communication was key to this. English is not the first language, and is often third or fourth language, of many of the Yolngu decision-makers. Both Wendy Brook-Davis and Wendy Schwerin found they needed to conduct many of their meetings with an interpreter to ensure full comprehension. This was critical to ensure the mandate; all decisions and operations are conducted by and with Yolngu people.

The remote locations of the homelands are challenging; it can take several weeks to assemble all parties required to make decisions and sign documentation. Wendy Schwerin in particular, spent significant periods on the homelands in consultation with the families and elders and building relationships. These conversations sought to establish the key components, such as the intent of the corporation, what it is able to do and for how it is to be managed.

Momentum is critical, so Lizzie documented a clear process and strategy for setting up of homeland business and business development. This ensured that work can continue not only with the existing homeland corporations but also with new and future homeland corporations.

Outcomes

Lirrwi's Tourism Masterplan strategy for 2014-2017 outlines establishing corporate structures, bank accounts and business plans for six participating homelands as a goal. To date five homelands have their incorporated status and ABNs, and three have established business plans and bank accounts.

On the compliance side, six Ochre cards have been processed allowing Lirrwi to work increasingly with school groups and participate in a 'Culture College', a new collaborative economic development initiative for the region, which commences in 2015. This initiative will see an additional 300 students participate in Lirrwi cultural tours in 2015, with a further increase in 2016. An MOU has been drafted and presented to Bawaka Aboriginal Corporation for feedback and consultation.

Matt Grooby, Manager of Lirrwi explains that the work done *"means that homelands now have, or will have, corporate structures that allows them to conduct business activities, apply for grants or pursue land tenure"*.

Next Steps

The next phase of the work is pursuing land tenure through the Northern Land Council, and developing MOUs and Service Agreements between Lirrwi and the homelands. Obtaining land tenure and being able to apply for funding will allow these homelands to develop visitor infrastructure in order to grow their business and sustain tours.

Underpinning all of this will be an education process and training in financial management systems and business management for the homelands' family groups embarking on this path to economic prosperity.

There are many areas where Jawun secondees can support Lirwi and the individual corporations with their vision. In 2015, a three-month secondee from the Australian Public Service will commence with Lirwi in Round 1, overlapping with a Cape York alumni member who is volunteering with the organisation for two months.