

Case study – accelerating Indigenous-led enterprise



Ngopamuldi Aboriginal Corporation—growing jobs for a nation

Background

Derek Walker grew up calling Raukkan home, a Ngarrindjeri boy firmly connected to culture. His father took him and his siblings on country 'every chance he could', to hunt, learn and understand *ruwe*, the Ngarrindjeri concept of land and all living things associated with it. Derek left his community to study agriculture, but after graduating was drawn back home. As he explains, *"When you're connected to country, it never leaves you"*.

In 2004, Derek and his son started Ngopamuldi Aboriginal Corporation, aligned with the Ngarrindjeri Nation. They wanted to create economically viable opportunities for Ngarrindjeri people to sustainably manage their country. As they saw it, *"There just wasn't a link between land care and people—i.e. jobs"*.

Jawun began supporting Ngopamuldi in 2016, when it had 24 staff and worked in land care, construction and maintenance. At that time, CEO Derek envisaged organisational growth to create more jobs on country, and to establish independent enterprises offering financial self-reliance.

Approach

Eighteen professional corporate and government employees have been seconded to Ngopamuldi since the partnership began, each following Derek's lead in the sharing of their skills and business acumen. They have supported land care programs, labour hire, tendering for new business, a shared services infrastructure, and development of a successful native wildflower business, Wild Flowers.

'Working on Country' was Ngopamuldi's first land care program. It employs and trains rangers to rehabilitate damaged native environments, use traditional land management practices, and protect culturally sensitive sites. Its full time employees, Ngarrindjeri men and women of various ages, achieve a vocational education and training qualification during their employment. Ngopamuldi also delivers an Aboriginal Learning on Country program for community members in South Australia to gain TAFE-accredited training in land and conservation management practices, and runs awareness sessions and paid apprenticeships for school students in Raukkan.

For Derek, provision of land care training and job opportunities to younger people is vital:

"Any opportunity to work on country, at home, is significant. From a Ngarrindjeri perspective, being connected to a particular place is incredibly important. We have a word for land that's ruwe; it's everything—trees, plants, animals, and connectedness between us and all the elements. Doing work that rehabilitates and remediates our country is gold for us"

Local elders are invited to share their stories of growing up on country with the young people, many of whom face considerable challenges in their everyday lives:

“There’s a lot of competing noise for young people, so what we want to do is present to them, ‘This is who we are, and who you are, and this is the opportunity to be involved in this’. Lots of people who’ve come and got involved have had a tough start in life, and this has been an opportunity to be consistent, get some work, improve their lot, and catch the vision of what it is to be involved in the work we do—not just land management but care of country, and connection to the cultural value attached to that.”

In 2015 Ngopamuldi began working on a Shared Services initiative with other Ngarrindjeri Nation organisations, saving costs and strengthening collaboration through the sharing of payroll, finance and other business functions.

In 2016, Ngopamuldi used a series of secondees to articulate a business case that culminated in the native foods initiative Wild Eats (see [2017 Jawun case study](#)). Following an introduction from a Jawun board member, this led to a partnership with Australian Wildflower Investment Company, and the business Wild Flowers was born—a sustainable native wildflower farm based on the shores of Lake Alexandrina.

Outcomes

Working on Country continues to be a proud demonstration of Ngopamuldi’s vision to balance economic and cultural value, and the rangers and community are proud that the land care work is making a difference—in the first years of Working on Country, frog, bird and fish species returned to the land and waters¹. Fifteen Ngopamuldi men and women have received a diploma or a Certificate III or IV while employed by Working on Country. And they say it makes them ‘who they are’, since as with language, regaining country is a means of reinforcing identity. Derek is motivated by changes in young people’s perceptions of their future:

“Over time, the imprint of Ngarrindjeri on the landscape has been fading, but we’re trying to reinvigorate that. You can tell the difference: we now see people taking much more care of country, hunting, doing things they wouldn’t otherwise have done.

We see a change in character. If you put time into it, young people take this up and grow. I get a lot of satisfaction from that, there’s no doubt about it. There’s some wayward young people, no doubt about that! But reinvigorating connection to country is good for them. When they know who they are, and where they’re from, it opens up a whole realm of possibility for who they want to be”.

Since it was created, the Shared Services initiative has provided payroll services to five Indigenous organisations and 115 employees, most of whom are Indigenous. It has processed over \$10m worth of transactions and around \$3.5m worth of payrolls, while processing an average of 35,000 transactions and 100 acquittals a year.

Wild Flowers has become a landmark success. Its rapid growth, in response to demand, is set to create 106 new Ngarrindjeri jobs on a 1000 acre commercial wildflower farm due to be operational in 2-4 years’ time. The farm intends to grow 21 Australian native wildflower species including Mountain Daisy and Cushion Bush, both unique to the region. It has a sleek new [website](#) open to enquiries. Derek is rightly proud of what it stands for:

“Through sustainable growing practices we nourish our Ruwe while yielding product each year, and our operations support employment and economic growth in the local Raukkan community. Our goal is to share the stories and beauty of Wild Harvest Flowers to Australia and the world, while supporting job pathways, skills development and economic prosperity for our nation.”

Ngopamuldi has emerged as a competent and visionary organisation. It now has 51 full time staff, all of whom are Indigenous, including carpenters, electricians, and technicians. It has won contracts for major

¹ <https://www.environment.gov.au/indigenous/workingoncountry/publications/pubs/casestudy-woc-raukkan.pdf>

civil construction or infrastructure projects, such as the National Broadband Network rollout by infrastructure company Fulton Hogan. This was part of a Kungun Ngarrindjeri Yunnan ('Listening to Ngarrindjeri People Talking') Agreement negotiated with the Ngarrindjeri Nation².

Through these streams of work, Ngopamuldi is nurturing country, creating wealth and supporting the next generation of Ngarrindjeri leaders. One of these is Kevin Kropinyeri Junior, Operations Manager and a Jawun Emerging Leaders program participant in 2017. Derek sees him reaching for a brighter future:

“Kevin was a city boy doing all the city things. He could have drifted into being a rascal but he came the other way. He came back home and got back involved. Now he manages our nurseries and is growing in confidence and knowledge and understanding. We're keen to marry culture with science and technical know-how, for things like propagation. Kev took the opportunity to learn and develop. He now has a Diploma of Conservation and Land Management, and I suspect he'll go on to study environmental science. He's a good lad.”

Kevin himself is excited about his work and what it means:

“This job means a whole lot to me—it gives me direction, and is an opportunity not just for me but for all the other guys on the ground.

The vision of a lot of people has led to this. The support of a lot of people, including the men I work with and leaders and mentors like Derek, has paved the way for this.

When I think about it, it's a big thing I'm doing but it's doing what I know and what I'm passionate about and love. Culture will always be important. We know who we are and where we come from. We speak our language, we have plans as a nation and a building nation. So we put things in place like commercialisation, to create sustainability. We know it takes hard work and success doesn't come overnight, but we're very prepared for that.

I want my children to be working alongside me. I want to show them what I've learned. I want to teach them about people like Uncle Derek, to pass that knowledge and those stories down. We don't know where we're going until we know where we've come from.”

Next steps

Jawun will continue to support Ngopamuldi and the Ngarrindjeri Nation through its secondment program and other opportunities to build capacity and connections. Through this, Derek says, Ngopamuldi hopes to further advance an Indigenous-led empowerment agenda:

“Jawun secondees have enabled real growth—in our staff and for Kevin. We've been very fortunate, it's gold for us. They're also good people. We hope they get something out of it too—like a benefit to them professionally, the chance to understand, the connection—and we understand they do. It gets quite emotional on both sides, there can be a few tears on both sides”.

Derek has his eye on the future for successive generations of Ngarrindjeri people. He hopes eventually to retire to an advisory role, to let the next generation of young people grow into leadership positions and set the course for the organisation and the Ngarrindjeri Nation.

² <http://www.ngarrindjeri.org.au/single-post/2016/06/22/Fulton-Hogan-Partnership-Signing-of-Kungun-Ngarrindjeri-Yunnan-Agreement>