

# The Indigenous Business Review

ISSUE 9, DECEMBER 2025

**NATION'S  
ROYALTY**

A new model  
takes shape  
in Canada

**INDIGENOUS  
BUSINESS AUSTRALIA**

Chair leads  
strategic shift

## Damien Djerrkura

Building Arnhem Land's  
new prosperous economy





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# The Indigenous Business Review

This edition of The Indigenous Business Review reveals a sector navigating major transitions while building new forms of capability, leadership and opportunity. Indigenous enterprises are demonstrating how commercial discipline, cultural authority and community investment can work together to build a more resilient national economy. At Argyle, Gija and Miriwoong families continue to set the standard for responsible mine closure. Their work through Gelganyem highlights the discipline required to protect Country, strengthen governance and ensure land is returned safely and on culturally informed terms. Their efforts reflect a broader national shift as Australia confronts the complexity of rehabilitating post-mining landscapes. In the Pilbara, **Wirraka Maya** is rebuilding a health-training pipeline to meet rising community need in an investment that will keep people on Country and grow a culturally informed workforce. A similar focus on circular solutions drives **Woollahra Group**'s partnership with Soap Aid, turning waste soap from mining camps into hygiene support for remote communities. Across the Top End, enterprise is reshaping regional economies. **NEALAC**'s expansion under CEO Damien Djerrkura shows what Indigenous-led development looks like when grounded in cultural authority and long-term planning, while **Mick's Cranes Australia** demonstrates how determination and technical discipline can open space in capital-intensive industries. A pact between SunCable, traditional owners and the **Northern Land Council** signals the scale of opportunity emerging in renewable energy. We also look at structural settings shaping the sector. New research reveals that half of all Indigenous procurement value flows to just 18 companies — a warning that policy success must be judged by distribution, not aggregate spend. And the Minerals Council's call for Indigenous equity in mining underscores a shift towards ownership and long-term value-creation.



Reece Harley  
Managing Editor

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**Publisher:** Indigenous Business Review NIT Pty Ltd

*The Indigenous Business Review is a 100% Aboriginal owned company; part of the National Indigenous Times group.*

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# Rio Tinto under pressure on closure standards

Remediation of mine sites is a fraught and touchy operation, **Reece Harley** reports

**W**hen traditional owners reflect on the early negotiations that shaped the Argyle Participation Agreement, two expectations stand out. Whatever went into Country would leave Country. And decisions about rehabilitation would respect cultural authority and longstanding responsibilities for land and waterways.

As the Argyle Diamond Mine approaches final closure, those expectations continue to frame the concerns raised by Gija and Miriwoong families through their representative body, Gelganyem. The mine ceased production in 2020 and Rio Tinto is undertaking extensive rehabilitation across the site. Works include reshaping landforms, removing above ground infrastructure, completing demolition programs and revegetating large areas of disturbed terrain. Company updates confirm major milestones such as the removal of the power station, airport and Argyle Village, backfilling of vent shafts, construction of containment cells and continuing water management works.

Although closure execution is advanced, Gelganyem chair Kia Dowell says several fundamental issues require further agreement before relinquishment can occur. Speaking at the Aboriginal Enterprises in Mining, Energy and Exploration conference in Darwin in November, she said the closure pathway did not yet meet the cultural, environmental or land use expectations of traditional owners.

"Closure for mining companies and closure for traditional owners are understood differently," she said. "There are concerns about long-term water quality, the pit lake, tailings that may remain on site and the condition of areas that have historically been used for fishing or other activities."

Gelganyem chair Kia Dowell, left, is calling for the Argyle mine site, above, to be rehabilitated with the health of local communities in mind. She says: "There are concerns about long-term water quality"

PICTURE: LANDI BRADSHAW





PICTURE: LANDI BRADSHAW

A central issue relates to the governance framework that applies to closure. The Argyle Participation Agreement was negotiated for an operational mine, while the state agreement between Rio Tinto and the WA government excludes traditional owners. Dowell says this limits the agreements' ability to guide post-mining land use and that it has left gaps in how cultural heritage, native title interests and long-term accountability are addressed.

Traditional owners have relied on the WA government to fulfil its responsibilities regarding contaminated sites, tenure, legacy land use arrangements and final land condition. Dowell says Gelganyem commissioned an independent technical review of Rio Tinto's 2021 mine closure plan because existing mechanisms had not provided sufficient assurance. The review contributed to the state's decision to update its mine closure guidelines, which came into effect in September 2025. The new guidelines give rights holders a clearer role in closure planning and set higher standards for proponents.

Dowell says further action is needed from regulators. She believes the state should require Rio Tinto to revise completion criteria and post-mining land use to reflect more than 20 years of Traditional Owner statements about cultural access and environmental baselines. She also says that if closure objectives are not met after relinquishment, the company must fund any required remediation so traditional owners are not left with unmanaged risks.

Rio Tinto has reported that Traditional Owner businesses now deliver almost half of all site works and services associated with closure, about 48 per cent of contracted activity. It says about \$150 million has been spent with these businesses to date, reflecting efforts

to build Indigenous participation during the final phase of operations.

Rio Tinto has also highlighted ongoing collaboration on a co-managed Cultural Heritage Management Plan, which will guide the management and monitoring of cultural sites through shared decision-making. Its recent closure newsletters detail additional work that is under way, including the installation of long-term seepage infrastructure at the south waste rock landform to neutralise acidic water before it enters creek systems. The structures will be monitored throughout a decade-long post-closure period. Revegetation is progressing across the tailings storage facility and waste rock landforms, supported by Gelganyem Seed Operation and the expanded Gelganyem Land Management division.

Dowell says cultural restoration requires the site to be returned as close as possible to its pre-mining condition, to the extent technically achievable. Gelganyem has therefore developed its own completion criteria, informed by cultural land use mapping, independent technical assessments and Traditional Owner expectations about access, water quality and final land condition.

Underlying this work is a broader organisational strategy. In recent years, Gelganyem has expanded its operational capacity to support closure and long-term maintenance. Gelganyem Land Management, based at its River Farm Road property, includes a seed collection and processing facility, a licensed pest management operation and a growing workforce trained in rehabilitation, monitoring and weed management. The division will continue working at Argyle and is positioning itself to service local governments, agricultural clients and other mining projects.

Its sister entity, Gooring Jimbila Contracting, has completed major civil works at Argyle including backfilling vent shafts, reshaping quarry and drainage areas, maintaining critical infrastructure and delivering site access and earthworks packages. Gelganyem reports that around 26 Traditional Owner businesses now operate in the region. About 16 are engaged by Rio Tinto on closure-related work.

Dowell says this capability shows traditional owners are well placed to contribute to rehabilitation and post-mining land management. However, she says capability alone does not resolve concerns about long-term water quality, waste retention or the behaviour of the pit lake as it fills over coming decades. Gelganyem's quarterly reports outline issues raised by independent experts, including acid and metalliferous drainage, the suitability of certain landforms and the adequacy of proposed containment measures.

Dowell believes Argyle highlights the need for broader policy reform. She supports a national closure framework that establishes completion criteria early in the mining life cycle and requires companies to seek approval if they want to amend those standards. She also says regulatory frameworks should be aligned to support traditional owners as the end land users of closed mines, ensuring they are not left with unresolved liabilities or incomplete rehabilitation.

The next year will be significant. Rio Tinto expects to complete closure works in 2026, after which the site will enter a monitoring and maintenance phase overseen by regulators and independent specialists. Traditional owners want a closure outcome that reflects their responsibilities to Country and ensures the land returned to them is safe, stable and suitable for future use. ●





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# One small idea has so paid off for all

Program gives soap a second life, writes **Giovanni Torre**

Every year, millions of soap bars used in Western Australia's mining camps by fly-in-fly-out (FIFO) workers end up in landfill. Now, with support from Fortescue, Indigenous-owned company Woollahra Group has teamed up with Soap Aid to change that.

Through Soap Aid's waste soap recycling program, used soap from mining accommodation sites is collected, recycled and remanufactured into fresh bars distributed to First Nations communities across Western Australia through its Camps to Communities initiative, improving access to hygiene and supporting better health outcomes.

Woollahra Group, a 100 per cent Indigenous-owned cleaning and hygiene product supplier, has long focused on reducing waste and delivering social benefit. Their 60-gram bar soap, packaged in recyclable cardboard and designed for FIFO worker rosters, reduced single-use packaging waste but the team wanted to go further.

Woollahra Group director Sam Smith says: "We asked whether we could remove bar soap waste entirely and with Soap Aid, we can close that loop and give waste a purpose."

"Millions of single-use bar soaps needlessly enter landfill, but by transforming waste into new soap, we're closing the loop, turning waste into wellness. Having companies like Civeo and Fortescue support our vision was a game-changer."

Soap Aid general manager Carol Bellew says: "Access to soap can make a real difference in preventing disease and with our partners' support, we're keeping waste out of landfill and getting soap to families who need it most."



Sam Smith with a box of recycled Soap Aid bars; the product has diverted about 150,000kg of waste from landfill



"Together, we're reducing waste, protecting the planet and delivering critical hygiene resources to communities in need. Soap Aid thanks Fortescue, Civeo

and Woollahra Group for their commitment to sustainability, social responsibility and to Soap Aid."

More than 1.5 million free soap bars have been delivered across Western Australia, diverting 150,000kg of waste soap from landfill and preventing 218,000kg of CO2e from entering the atmosphere.

Fortescue has been among the first major resource companies to join the initiative, supporting soap collection through its accommodation sites.

Fortescue director of approvals, community and services Rosli Wheelock says: "We're proud to support Woollahra and Soap Aid in this effort, and to see the difference it's making in First Nations communities in remote areas. It's a simple change with far-reaching benefits."

Combining Indigenous business leadership, environmental care and community health, the partnership shows small ideas can do lasting good. ●



# Procurement's hits and misses

Public money is not being shared evenly, **Brendan Foster** reports

**T**he federal government's Indigenous Procurement Policy has long been promoted as a major success story, but a new study has revealed that billions of dollars in Commonwealth contracts have been captured by only a handful of Indigenous-registered companies — prompting warnings of deep structural failure in the system.

Since it began in 2015, the Indigenous Procurement Policy has generated \$12.6 billion in federal spending with First Nations businesses and almost 80,000 contracts have been awarded to more than 4400 Indigenous-owned enterprises. On paper, the policy has exceeded every target set for it.

But new analysis by Australian National University research fellow Christian Eva based on eight years of freedom of information data never before examined publicly, shows that the distribution of these benefits is far narrower than the headline numbers suggest. Dr Eva found that half of all Commonwealth contracts over \$10,000 had been awarded to just 11 businesses, and that half of the total value, about \$7 billion, had gone to only 18 businesses.

"Given that the IPP was succeeding and has succeeded so well in terms of its targets, in terms of number of contracts and money spent, I don't think there's much appetite to lift the hood and see what's going on because it's been so successful," Dr Eva told the Indigenous Business Review.

"But even if that is the case, how do we make sure the policy is working for a broader range of firms? How can we promote more diversity to genuinely ensure sector growth, which is the primary aim of the policy, rather than simply awarding millions of dollars in contracts to a small number of businesses, or worse, favouring certain firms that win multiple contracts?"

His paper, *Who Defines Success?*, published in the *Australian Journal of Public Administration*, provides the first comprehensive distributional analysis of the IPP since its creation. One of its most striking findings is

a geographical skew in Commonwealth spending. According to the research, 30 per cent of IPP contract value, about \$2.1 billion, went to companies based in the ACT, despite the Territory being home to just 1 per cent of Australia's Indigenous population.

"At first I thought these could be national businesses, they just have a base in Canberra," Dr Eva says. "But these are firms that are operating almost entirely out of Canberra. They are Canberra firms, and they're likely established for procurement purposes, whether they were here before or after the IPP."

The data also shows concentration in labour hire, consulting and construction firms clustered around government departments and procurement panels. Dr Eva says these patterns reflect the architecture of government purchasing rather than the diversity of the Indigenous business sector.

"You can raise your eyebrows to businesses about getting contracts," he says. "And some people have different perceptions on what they see as black-cladding and what isn't."

Black-cladding occurs when non-Indigenous companies expand their Indigenous shareholder base, or assert Indigenous identity, to

qualify for IPP contracts. While Dr Eva says he is not suggesting widespread black-cladding in the national capital, he says the IPP's design makes the practice almost impossible to detect.

"I'm not super confident about the changes like they're saying; they can crack down on black-cladding," he says. "The rules are too lax and enforcement is also lax. Therefore, there is no black-cladding because, according to the technical definition of the criteria, all of these firms meet the criteria; it is the public perception that they do not deserve to meet them."

Earlier this year, the federal government announced reforms requiring Indigenous businesses to be at least 51 per cent Indigenous-owned and controlled to access the IPP. But the study says that without stronger governance, clearer control tests and consistent



**We need to change the way the policy is working**



verification, the reforms will not address the underlying problem: the policy rewards businesses best positioned to navigate procurement, not necessarily those delivering community value.

The FOI data also reveals significant gaps in basic monitoring: ownership information is missing for the majority of suppliers. About 64 per cent of firms recorded under the IPP appear with "unknown" ownership status. While this does not prove ineligibility, it highlights major failures in recordkeeping and verification across government. Despite the IPP's significant role in increasing Indigenous participation in the economy, Dr Eva says its celebrated success is masking increasingly narrow outcomes.





"We need to change the way the policy is working to prevent hundreds of millions of dollars going to a handful of businesses," he says. "We need a more equitable policy that supports a wider range of firms and the broader aim of the IPP."

Five years before the policy existed, Commonwealth spending with Indigenous firms was about \$15 million annually; today the figure is nearing \$15 billion. "That's not nothing," Dr Eva says.

"But with any Indigenous program at a federal level, we really do need stronger transparency and stronger accountability."

National Indigenous Business Chambers of Australia chairwoman Naomi Anstess says the concentration of

half of IPP value in just 18 companies "is not a success story but a structural red flag".

"IPP is hitting targets, but it's not hitting the mark," she told the Indigenous Business Review. "This data shows the benefits aren't flowing to our communities. They're pooling in Canberra and in businesses that meet the minimum definition, not the spirit of it."

Anstess says the issue goes beyond distribution and reaches into governance.

"Indigenous people must have authority over how Indigenous procurement works," she says. "IPP was groundbreaking, but it hasn't evolved. If the policy doesn't mature, its outcomes won't either. We need transparency, we need accountability, and we need

Indigenous-led reform; not just reporting that tells a good story on paper."

Although Minister for Indigenous Australians Malarndirri McCarthy did not directly address the concentration concerns raised in the study, she says the government remains committed to strengthening the policy. "More than 4600 Indigenous businesses have been awarded Commonwealth contracts under the IPP," the Northern Territory senator says. "The IPP is an important part of First Nations economic empowerment, supporting the growth of the Indigenous business sector and significantly increasing the Commonwealth's purchasing from First Nations businesses." ●



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# Bricks laid the groundwork for a powerhouse

From humble beginnings, one organisation now deals in the millions, **Reece Harley** reports

In the remote coastal town of Nhulunbuy in the Northern Territory, Damien Djerrkura leads one of Australia's most dynamic Aboriginal-owned businesses, the North East Arnhem Land Aboriginal Corporation.

NEALAC, awarded the 2025 Blak Business of the Year by the Northern Territory Indigenous Business Network, is a model of Indigenous-led development. For Djerrkura, who started working with the organisation as a teenager, the role is personal.

"My father was general manager here in the '90s," he says. "I used to come back on school holidays and work at YBE (a charitable fund operated by NEALAC). There's a lot of family history."

## From brickworks to business powerhouse

NEALAC began in 1968 as Yirrkala Brickworks, shortly after the Yolngu people's historic Bark Petitions laid the groundwork for land rights. It has grown into a regional enterprise representing 26 Traditional Owner clans and employing more than 100 people. Today, NEALAC's operations span land rehabilitation, civil maintenance, horticulture, freight, logistics and mechanical services. It generates about \$10m annually, nearly half of which is reinvested in local wages. "We're not just about generating revenue; it's about circulating that wealth within the community," Djerrkura says.

NTIBN chief executive Naomi Anstess says: "NEALAC represents exactly what Indigenous economic leadership looks like when communities are trusted to lead ... through discipline, culture and commercial strength."

## Training with culture and care

Central to NEALAC's model is the Djama Mirri Mala 







employment program. “There was a gap between the Community Development Program providers and real jobs,” Djerrkura says. “So we built our own Indigenous Pathways program, one that understood cultural obligations.”

The eight-week program offers readiness training, tool handling, safety inductions and personal support. “We make it culturally safe. There’s flexibility for ceremonies and family. And we maintain a labour pool so if someone’s away, another Yolngu worker can step in,” Djerrkura says.

Dozens have completed the program, leading to placements in mechanics, logistics and landscaping. “It’s about more than jobs,” Djerrkura says. “It’s about dignity and self-determination.”

## A broader vision for Northeast Arnhem Land

With Rio Tinto’s Gove bauxite mine winding down and ceasing mining by 2030, NEALAC is helping to build a post-mining economy. “We’re looking at creating our own economy, one that uses our land and culture to drive growth,” Djerrkura says.

The Yirrkala Farm Project, a joint venture with Gumatj and Rirratjingu, grows produce for local stores and trains Yolngu in agriculture. “It’s about food security, fresh produce and new skills,” Djerrkura says. “Our people deserve access to fresh, affordable food. Growing it here, on our terms, makes a difference.”

NEALAC has also taken on year-round civil and environmental work. “We’ve had contracts with the Nhulunbuy Corporation for a number of years,” Djerrkura says. “General maintenance, arboreal services, landscaping, essential services that people need.”

## Car hire, repairs and opportunity on Country

Among NEALAC’s proudest ventures is its acquisition of a local vehicle hire and mechanical business, financed through CommBank. “That was an acquisition. It came with the workshop and the panel and paint smash repairs as well,” Djerrkura says.

This has enabled NEALAC to consolidate essential services. “It actually was packaged up quite nicely as opposed to us just buying a car hire business,” Djerrkura says. “It kept everything in-house as opposed to outsourcing the mechanics or the smash repairs.”

The division includes car hire, mechanical diagnostics, smash repairs and a tyre and accessories shop. It employs around a dozen staff, including several Yolngu apprentices. “We’ve already got two Indigenous apprentices, one’s in the mechanical workshop, one’s in the smash repair workshop,” he says.

CommBank Indigenous Business Banking executive manager Mitchell Heritage says: “Supporting NEALAC’s acquisition was about more than finance. It’s about backing a true example of self-determination where the community owns and operates essential services, builds skills, and creates jobs on country. Our ongoing commitment to supporting Indigenous business across Australia is built on principles of respect, self-determination and partnership. NEALAC brings these principles to life every day and we’re delighted to support their continued growth and contribution to the broader community.”

Djerrkura calls it a forever industry; a local, sustainable service the community can depend on. “Everyone needs a mechanic if they’ve got a car,” he says. “We wanted to







North East Arnhem Land Aboriginal Corporation is a source of education, employment and fulfilment for many in the community

## Deal signed to improve islanders' finance access

The Commonwealth Bank and Indigenous Business Australia have signed a new agreement to improve access to finance for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. The partnership, announced in October 2025, will focus on home ownership, business lending and investment in renewable energy projects. According to a joint statement, the two organisations aim to develop co-lending models, mentoring programs and targeted support for Indigenous entrepreneurs. The collaboration brings together IBA's community lending expertise and CBA's national scale. Progress is to be reviewed annually.

invest in a service that our community relies on every day, and that can outlast seasonal shifts and the future mine closure."

## Strengthening community, building capacity

Profits are directed to programs like town and homelands bus services, entrepreneur support and workforce infrastructure. "This organisation is helping that process towards self-determination," Djerrkura says. "Everyone can go back on Country, start their own businesses, get family back on Country." NEALAC's bus services have become essential to remote access. "It's not just about profit; it's about responding to what our mob needs," Djerrkura says.

Heritage says: "When Indigenous businesses like NEALAC grow, the benefits ripple out with more jobs, more skills and stronger communities. CommBank is committed to walking alongside our Indigenous business customers, providing tailored support and celebrating their success."

## Looking ahead: A homegrown economy

NEALAC is now expanding its freight and tyre business. "We're still in the process of developing a client

base," Djerrkura says. "It's about having those connections with other Indigenous businesses and helping them build capacity."

Anstess says: "NEALAC lifts other Blak businesses with them. That's the difference between a corporation and a movement."

"When Yolngu businesses have access to sealed roads, digital infrastructure and fair procurement settings, they won't just participate, they'll outperform. Closing the Gap won't be achieved through social policy alone. It will be achieved through Blak industry. NEALAC proves that every day."

## Walking two worlds, leading one future

As only the second Yolngu CEO of NEALAC, Djerrkura blends business leadership with cultural authority. "I know what my dad did for the organisation and where he wanted to take the business. My outlook's much the same," he says.

His vision for the future is firmly embedded in self-determination principles. "We're here to say, 'how can we help you build your own capability?'"

As Djerrkura and his team look ahead, their message is clear: the future of the region is already here, and it's being led from within. •



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# Nations Royalty building wealth

**A Canadian scheme locks in long-term equity, Reece Harley reports**

In a boardroom in Vancouver, a quiet financial experiment is under way that could change the way Indigenous nations participate in mining. It is called Nations Royalty, a majority Indigenous-owned public company that takes a long-established mining finance model and re-tools it for Indigenous control.

In Canada, many Indigenous groups hold legally recognised land rights through treaties and comprehensive agreements, some that are centuries old. When a mine operates on their land, they negotiate impact benefit agreements, which are legally binding contracts that define how revenue, jobs and environmental responsibilities are shared. The payments often stretch decades into the future.

Nations Royalty's innovation is to gather those future payments into a single listed company, one that is majority owned by the First Nation itself. Instead of waiting decades for royalties to trickle in, the community exchanges them for shares in the company today. Those shares can be traded, giving them an immediate market value and access to international investment capital.

"It's about taking control of our own financial destiny," says vice-president of corporate development Kody Penner. "Rather than being drip-fed payments over 70 years, we can use the value of those royalties now, to build, educate and invest."

## **A miner turned financier**

Penner's career bridges two worlds, and so does his identity. He is a member of the Tahltan Nation in northwestern British Columbia, part of a region where Indigenous peoples have been shaping the modern mining economy for decades. He began his working life ➤



Nations Royalty corporate  
development vice president  
Kody Penner





Underground at the Brucejack Mine before joining the Tahltan Central Government, where he helped local people find work in the resource sector. After studying commerce at the University of British Columbia, he moved into equity research and strategic planning roles at major mining firms including Teck Resources. At Nations Royalty, he brings together his lived experience as an Indigenous community member and his training in geology, governance and capital markets.

The company's structure is simple. The Nisga'a Nation, based in the Nass Valley of northwestern British Columbia, contributed its mining royalty streams to establish the company and now owns about 77 per cent of its shares. The remaining stock is held by investors, including a group led by Canadian financier Frank Giustra, known for co-founding Wheaton Precious Metals, one of the world's largest royalty companies.

That partnership brings expertise, but decision-making remains Indigenous. "The Nisga'a wanted to build something that would make them independent of government transfers," Penner says. "They wanted to generate their own wealth, not rely on grants."

## How the model works

Royalty companies earn income not by mining, but by receiving a share of mine revenue. By pooling royalties from multiple projects, they spread risk. Nations Royalty uses that model but it partners with Indigenous nations that already hold royalty rights through benefit



## Capital can flow in from anywhere, but ownership stays with the nation

agreements. In return for contributing those rights, nations gain equity in the company.

The advantage is liquidity and diversification. A nation once dependent on a single mine's fortunes can now hold a stake in many. As a listed company, Nations Royalty can raise funds globally, from Zurich, London or Sydney, to acquire new royalties.

"The public listing opens borders," Penner says. "Capital can flow in from anywhere, but ownership stays with the nation."

In practical terms, the Nisga'a have turned an income stream that might once have taken 70 years to realise into an equity position valued at about \$100,000,000 today.

## The Canadian setting

Canada's resource geography makes this possible. In British Columbia, Yukon and Quebec, many First Nations have signed treaties that grant land ownership, revenue rights and co-management of resources. These legal foundations have created a generation of Indigenous governments and development corporations that negotiate directly with mining firms, that operate training programs and that reinvest profits locally. The Tahltan Nation, where Penner grew up, is among the most successful. Its development corporation employs hundreds of members and builds major infrastructure across its territory. That experience shaped his belief that financial structures can be as transformative as physical ones.

"The pride that comes from building something for your own community is powerful," he says. "When people have good jobs and purpose, it breaks the cycle of despair. The royalty company is just another tool for that."

## A mirror for Australia

In Australia, the Native Title system recognises Indigenous connection to land but it generally does not confer freehold ownership. Aboriginal corporations may receive royalty streams through mining agreements, though those payments are commonly fragmented, and navigating tax and governance frameworks remains complex. Unlike in Canada, Australia offers limited broad tax exemption regimes





Clockwise from far left: Kisault mine and Brucejack mine, British Columbia; Nations Royalty, Fiore Group, and Nisga'a representatives at the Nisga'a Lisims Government Administration Building; and Nations Royalty meets with Nisga'a leadership to mark their Toronto stock exchange listing



for Indigenous corporations. Moreover, land returned via native title or land rights legislation often faces legal and administrative barriers to development, and when used commercially, it may be subject to local council rates and service charges.

Where Canadian First Nations can sometimes operate as quasi-municipal entities with powers to raise revenue, Australian Aboriginal corporations must navigate charity law, corporate regulation and government oversight. That structure limits innovation.

Penner avoids prescription. "Every jurisdiction is different," he says, "but the principles, governance, accountability and access to capital, are universal."

Canadian mining giant Agnico Eagle, which operates the Fosterville gold mine in Victoria, has signed a landmark partnership with the Dja Dja Wurrung Clans Aboriginal Corporation, the first of its kind in the state. Modelled partly on the Canadian approach to benefit agreements, it suggests cross-border collaboration is beginning. Penner, who sits on Agnico Eagle's Indigenous advisory committee, sees that as a sign of things to come.

## The risks of innovation

Nations Royalty's experiment is still new. Listed on the TSX Venture Exchange in 2024, its market value remains modest. It must prove that a First Nations-controlled royalty company can withstand commodity cycles without diluting its Indigenous ownership or

losing focus to outside investors. Critics say turning future payments into equity exposes communities to market volatility. A falling share price could erode value faster than a slow but steady royalty stream. Others fear that financialising benefit agreements might distance decision-making from traditional governance.

Penner acknowledges those risks. "Any new model carries risk," he says. "But the alternative is to stay dependent on other people's capital. This way, we can design the rules ourselves."

To manage that risk, the board includes Nisga'a representatives and independent directors with mining and legal expertise. The company operates under Canadian securities law, publishing regular financial reports, a level of transparency that is not always present in private entities.

## A generational opportunity

The global transition to renewable energy and electric vehicles is driving demand for critical minerals such as copper, nickel and uranium, much of which lies beneath Indigenous land in both Canada and Australia. Penner calls it a "generational opportunity" for Indigenous nations to move from managing poverty to managing wealth.

"With wealth comes responsibility," he says. "It means funding education, protecting the environment, building businesses that last."

For him, the question is no longer whether Indigenous groups can attract capital, but whether they

can build governance structures strong enough to engage investors on equal terms.

## A balance sheet for the future

Nations Royalty remains a small company with a large ambition, to make Indigenous ownership of capital markets an act of self-determination. It does not promise to erase inequities, but to transform economic participation by turning sporadic royalty flows into accessible upfront capital that can fund profitable ventures, infrastructure and community wealth.

Its success will be measured less by share price than by what the Nisga'a and future shareholders build with that capital. If it enables new enterprises, broadband networks, housing or clean energy projects, its value will be counted in self-sufficiency as much as in profit.

"The public vehicle is risk capital from the ground up," Penner says. "We fly to Switzerland, London, Australia, wherever the money is. Capital can flow across borders, but the ownership stays Indigenous."

The principle is simple but profound. Royalties can be turned into working capital and working capital can become sovereignty. In the balance sheets of First Nations, and perhaps one day Aboriginal corporations in Australia, lies the potential to redefine the relationship between land and capital, resource and return, dependence and decision. Nations Royalty offers not a shortcut to prosperity, but a framework through which Indigenous wealth can be realised, reinvested and retained for generations. ●





# Pathways to prosperity

Zak Kirkup seeks to make a community impact through employment opportunities, Reece Harley reports

**Z**ak Kirkup grew up in Midland, in Perth's eastern suburbs, in a family shaped by the long shadow of Yamatji history. His father's family are from the Champion Bay region near Geraldton, descended from the small Wilunyu group whose lives were defined for decades by restrictions imposed on Aboriginal people. That legacy, combined with the realities of his childhood, shaped how he understands identity and responsibility.

His grandfather was born on an Aboriginal reservation outside Geraldton, where strict controls governed daily life. "They grew up on the reservation, unable to come into Geraldton without police consent, unable to marry freely or run a business," he says. A historical account of his family's matriarch, Granny Kirkup, records that "around 90 per cent of us were wiped out as a group".

He saw early how this history shaped present-day circumstances. "According to the book, we were quite established around the Champion Bay area," he says, "and then obviously devastated when the British arrived." The contrast between the past and his own

opportunities pushed him towards public life. "Politics or public service was the way out for me," he says. "That was the thing that let me march out of Midland and get out of the cycle of struggle."

## Rising fast, falling hard

Kirkup entered parliament young and became opposition leader ahead of the 2021 state election. It was a contest defined by overwhelming public support for Premier Mark McGowan's Covid leadership. The Liberal Party suffered a historic defeat, and Kirkup's political career ended abruptly.

Afterwards, he felt unmoored. "It was a massive amount of depression and being very unsure about what to do with my life," he says. He had left university early and spent "the vast majority" of his adult life in politics. "I had nothing to fall back on."

A conversation with future business partner Adam Di Placido helped set a new direction. Di Placido had read his speeches about his father and grandfather and the structural racism that shaped their lives. "Adam said, 'why don't you do something in that?'," Kirkup says.

The suggestion prompted him to see enterprise as a tool for social change. "I believe the most important thing you can do is give someone a job or training so they can make their lives better," he says. That idea became the foundation of the companies he would build.

## Creating pathways through trades

Kolbang launched in 2021 as an electrical services company built around Aboriginal employment and apprenticeships. "We focus on electrical services," he says, "and we work with apprentices through to electricians."

Employees have joined from across Western Australia and interstate. "We've got people who've moved from Broome and Kununurra, even Tasmania," Kirkup says. "There's pride in helping someone get a trade, especially if they can go back and help look after their own community."

Kolbang grew rapidly. "We're the largest private employer of Aboriginal people in the electrical services





Clockwise from main: Zak Kirkup says parliamentary life was "a daily battle"; a young Zak with his father Rob; Kirkup with Kolbang electrical services colleagues; Kirkup holds a majority stake in Budget offshoot Chalkwest



space in WA," he says, reflecting its design as a dedicated Indigenous employer.

## Expanding into civil construction

In 2023, Kirkup acquired PowerOn Cabling, a horizontal drilling and civil works company. "It picks up everything that's above ground and puts it underground," he says. Drilling offered an alternative pathway for workers. "Unlike electrical, it's not years of certification. It's small groups and outside. It's a great opportunity."

PowerOn has since expanded into building electrical substations for major infrastructure projects, including Perth's new passenger rail line, Metronet, and WA's clean energy link. Aboriginal employment has risen steadily. "We've used what we learnt at Kolbang and grown PowerOn from nearly no Aboriginal employment to now 16 per cent," he says. "That is continuing to grow nearly every month."

## Indigenous ownership in a global system

In 2025, Kirkup acquired a majority stake in Chalkwest, the longstanding West Australian franchise for Budget Car and Truck Rental. "Chalkwest is a franchise holder of the Budget brand," he says. The business operates in 12 locations, including seven regional airports, and manages a fleet of more than 1300 vehicles.

Some of the state's largest employers rely on Chalkwest. "Some of the largest companies in the

# There's pride in helping someone get a trade

country have relied on Chalkwest for 25 years to keep them moving," he says. "BHP, Rio, MinRes, the government of Western Australia."

Chalkwest expands Indigenous employment into regions where Kolbang and PowerOn do not operate. Mechanics, detailers and customer service roles create opportunities in the Pilbara, the South West and metropolitan Perth.

Kirkup sees mechanical apprenticeships as a natural extension. "Cars are so important for connecting Aboriginal people to community, particularly in regional and remote WA," he says. "I really want to get into the mechanical space. I think that'll be my next move."

The company's identity is central to its value. "We are part of a global business, but we're owned locally," he says. "We're the only Aboriginal-owned global franchise in the country." A familiar vehicle, he says, comes with a different kind of impact. "A HiLux is a

HiLux, but the difference with Chalkwest is a client can probably get it better from us, probably cheaper and they'll know they're helping support the Aboriginal community with training, employment and broader support for mob-owned causes."

## Life beyond parliament

Running three companies while raising a young child with his wife Katie leaves little time for hobbies. "All I do is read, run, come to work or look after ten-month-old Theodore with Katie," he says.

Running remains central to his balance and wellbeing. "Running has kept me alive," he says. Parliamentary life, by contrast, was "a daily battle".

## Enterprise as impact

Kirkup believes business now gives him a more direct path to community impact than parliament ever did. "We're giving more jobs, opportunity and having a greater impact than when I was elected," he says. "That is the benefit of enterprise."

People often assume, as a former Liberal leader, that he grew up in privilege. "Instead my family's struggled," he says. "Generations of racial injustice and structural inequality."

Across Kolbang, PowerOn and Chalkwest, he follows a consistent model: build strong commercial enterprises, prioritise Aboriginal employment and invest deeply in training. "It is about helping support people in their journey of employment and training to help close the gap." ●



# Crane couple truly on the rise

This NT business is on the up and up, **Reece Harley** reports

In the Northern Territory, where logistics and distance shape daily life, a new Indigenous-owned crane company is establishing itself as a capable and community-focused operator. Mick's Cranes Australia, founded less than a year ago by partners Michael Assan and Katherine Coggan, has grown from a second-hand ute and ad hoc labouring work to a structured crane, transport and labour hire provider supporting defence, construction and gas projects across the Top End.

The story behind that growth rests on experience, planning and the determination of two people who brought different strengths into one business vision.

## A partnership built on experience, determination

Assan is a Wakka Wakka man, born in Katherine and raised between Queensland and the Territory. He began his working life as a carpenter. When a bridge project required additional help installing beams, he moved into rigging before stepping fully into cranes. He has now spent more than 20 years in the sector, working on small pick-and-carry jobs through to major lifts in mining, gas and offshore industries. "I was a chippy when I first moved back," he says, but over time "I just grew into the industry and loved it."

Coggan's background is in fuel distribution and logistics. When the two met, she was running her own refuelling business. Their relationship, and later their business partnership, began with a simple conversation on a long drive. She asked what he wanted to do in life. "I want to own my own crane business," he told her. Within a year, she had closed her fuel operation and the pair committed to building that business together.

## Starting without capital

Cranes are expensive assets and few companies start





**Mick's Cranes'**  
**Michael Assan,**  
**Katherine**  
**Coggan and their**  
**daughter.**

without significant capital. Assan and Coggan's only asset was their house. "People don't look at you unless you've got an asset," Coggan says.

Their early months involved Assan taking freelance rigging and labouring jobs, driving between sites in a worn ute, while Coggan handled administration and the fast-moving co-ordination that soon became their hallmark. They wrote a detailed business plan and relied on relationships Assan had had built over two decades. That network provided their breakthrough. A senior figure invited them to Darwin for a meeting and offered a pathway into cross-hire arrangements, allowing them to access cranes without the heavy cost of early purchases. "We went from the one to in November having two cranes," Assan says. Growth followed quickly. "It's just escalated. It's been a crazy ride. I haven't stopped yet."

Today the firm owns a small core fleet and supplements it through hire arrangements that give them reach across the Territory. They service Katherine, Darwin and surrounding regions and are preparing for further expansion as new projects emerge.

## A typical day in a complex business

Crane operations require discipline, planning and detailed compliance work. Assan outlines the structure of each day. The crew meets in the yard to run through planned jobs, check rigging gear, confirm dates, tests and permits and to complete pre-starts on cranes, trucks and trailers. Before leaving the yard, they call the client.

On site, they hold a high-risk meeting and review their Safe Work Method Statements to match the specific job. "Every job's different," Assan says. "Our SWMS need to match it." Where needed, they complete a take-five assessment before the lift. After the job, they inspect all rigging again for cuts or defects before returning to the yard.

Much of their work is rapid response. "We're very reactive," Coggan says. In any given week, they may be at Tindal, Bradshaw, Melville Island or supporting contractors in the Beetaloo Basin. Between larger commitments, they assist small businesses and residents with shorter lifts and increasingly provide

labour hire to companies that have their own cranes but lack the knowledge to operate them safely. "They don't know what they're doing," Coggan says. "So that's where we come in."

The company has maintained a clean safety record. "We're at zero, which is good," Assan says, treating safety performance as a baseline expectation.

## Breaking into the market

Becoming the first Indigenous-owned crane company in the Northern Territory came with extra challenges. "It's hard to prove yourself in this industry," Coggan says. She recalls early feedback questioning their documentation despite Assan's extensive experience. "We've always had to prove that our safety standards are what they are." Entry into defence work took time. "It took us ages to get into defence, get into some major projects across the NT," Coggan says. Even now, Assan says, "every day we have to prove ourselves".

Despite these challenges, the company has secured work on key defence programs and it is now engaged in larger construction and gas projects. Their ability to mobilise quickly, combined with the reputation Assan earned over many years, has helped them build trust. Consistent performance on smaller regional jobs has reinforced that confidence and positioned the company on more tender lists across the Territory.

## Creating pathways for Indigenous workers

From the outset, Assan and Coggan wanted to support Indigenous employment. "We built MCA not just for us, but for everybody," Coggan says. The company now partners with the local community development program provider to bring inexperienced Aboriginal workers into the industry. These new entrants receive mentoring and training on the job.

Assan believes the crane industry offers long-term careers that many young people have not considered. "People don't see it as a job opportunity," he says. "It's so big and it's a career."

Their growing labour hire arm strengthens this pathway, giving workers exposure to different sites while assisting contractors that need skilled personnel.

## Looking ahead

Assan sees significant opportunity over the next five years as defence, gas and civil programs expand across the Territory. "The opportunity is there for us," he says. The focus now is on recruiting the right people, expanding their presence and maintaining safety and quality as demand increases.

Coggan says they want to grow in a way that lifts others with them. "You need to find the right people to help you grow and help them grow too," she says.

Mick's Cranes Australia is still a young business, yet it is already contributing to local employment, supporting regional contractors and demonstrating that an Indigenous-owned crane company can compete in a demanding, capital-intensive sector. It is a story rooted in hard work, experience and a clear sense of purpose, and it is only at the beginning of its climb. ●



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# Multibillion-dollar ambition



## Activating capital is crucial to prosperity, writes Indigenous Business Australia's board chairman

Australia's Indigenous-led economy has entered a period of remarkable growth. Indigenous businesses are being established at record rates and the fastest-growing group of new business leaders are First Nations women. This surge is a signal that inclusive economic growth and Indigenous prosperity belong on the national agenda.

Earlier this year, the Australian parliament granted Indigenous Business Australia new powers to accelerate Indigenous economic self-sufficiency. These powers recognise a simple truth: when Indigenous nations and entrepreneurs have the capital they need, they contribute to national productivity and prosperity at scale. In response, IBA has refreshed its strategy, reaffirming a commitment at its core: building Indigenous economic prosperity on Indigenous terms.

IBA's 2030 Strategy has four key objectives: Raising capital, deploying capital, patient capital and shaping capital. Each reflects an essential element of what it will take for the Indigenous-led economy to flourish.

Raising capital is the first major step. With its expanded mandate, IBA aims to mobilise between \$5bn and \$7bn over the next five years. That ambition is grounded in a clear opportunity: banks, investors, institutions and capital markets are increasingly seeing Indigenous interests as partners in creating wealth. New partnerships will help IBA to direct substantial capital flows into Indigenous economic development.

Once raised, capital must move efficiently and in ways that support Indigenous priorities. This is the purpose of deploying capital. Whether it is housing, infrastructure, renewables, resource projects, or Indigenous businesses ready to scale, IBA is committed to ensuring appropriate capital hits right place, right time.

Indigenous Australians have stewarded economic systems on this continent for

tens of thousands of years. That long-term perspective is a strategic advantage. The third objective, patient capital, recognises that strong, sustainable economies cannot and should not be rushed. IBA's role is to match that horizon with long-duration financial support for regional economic development. Patient capital creates certainty. It allows Indigenous enterprises and nations to build wealth across generations.

The fourth pillar, shaping capital, focuses on the information required to make investment decisions. Australia will benefit from a clear, reliable picture of the Indigenous-led economy — its scale, composition and growth trajectory. Through a new Office of the Indigenous Economy, led by IBA's first chief economist, the unit will publish business and economic data, which will be available to investors, policymakers and researchers, strengthening investment decision-making.

The IBA 2030 strategy is designed to match the scale of economic activity occurring and projected to occur, on Indigenous lands and waters. From families buying their home to Indigenous companies entering major contracts, the opportunity is immense.

That is why IBA is calling for partnership. The organisation's strategy is about unlocking greater private sector investment. It is about ensuring that when Indigenous Australians pursue economic opportunity, whether in business, housing, energy, critical minerals, tourism, or infrastructure, they are not held back by capital constraints.

Turning Indigenous prosperity from aspiration to reality requires shared effort.

IBA is getting ready, and with new legislative powers and a clear strategy in place, the moment to move forward has arrived. With support from investors, institutions, policymakers and the broader public, Indigenous economic self-sufficiency is within reach, and all of Australia will benefit from its realisation. ●



# Three key steps on the path to empowerment

A major mining conference has been told that Indigenous participation is no longer enough and that ownership and exploration are the best ways to build intergenerational wealth, writes **Reece Harley**

**A**t the 2025 Aboriginal Enterprises in Mining, Energy and Exploration conference in Darwin, Minerals Council of Australia Indigenous partnerships and communities principal adviser Matt Denyer issued a challenge that signalled a shift in national mining policy: procurement has opened the door — but true self-determination will come only through ownership.

Speaking on the second day of the conference, held under the theme Beyond Boundaries: Partnerships, Power and Prosperity, Denyer told delegates that while Indigenous procurement had transformed relationships between Aboriginal enterprises and the mining sector, the next phase must be about equity and control.

"Participation alone isn't power, and visibility isn't value," he said. "If we are standing here in five years telling the same story — 'we won more contracts' — we will have failed. Because the world will have moved ahead, but Indigenous business will still be in supply-chain mode, not in ownership mode."

## A sector ready for change

The AEMEE network, which hosted the conference, was founded to strengthen Indigenous participation in Australia's resources industries. Over the past decade, it has become a key forum for Aboriginal business leaders, traditional owners and industry to debate how equity can replace dependency.

AEMEE chief executive Jyi Lawton has long argued



## These reforms ... are opportunities to reap rewards

that Indigenous control, not just inclusion, must define the future. "If we can't determine how our minerals are developed and where the profits go, then we're still standing outside the gate," he said in an earlier address.

Denyer's speech echoed that call from within the establishment itself: a notable statement from an organisation representing BHP, Rio Tinto, Hancock Iron Ore, South32, Glencore, Newmont and Darwin Port among others. His message was blunt: co-ownership is not charity but smart business.

## Closing the gap

A Gomeri man born on Giabal and Jarowair country and now based on Ngunnawal land, Denyer joined the minerals council after two decades in Indigenous policy and business development.

In his speech, he acknowledged the sector's

progress. In 2024-25, Indigenous business procurement reached \$5.83 billion. Mining accounted for \$1.64 billion, about 28 per cent of that. Minerals council members now employ 6000 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, who earn an average salary of \$158,800.

Yet despite these figures, he says, the economic gap remains vast.

"We have only one Indigenous-led mine, no Indigenous-owned processing facilities, and no Indigenous capital funds capturing meaningful shares of that value," he says. "That gap is risk, because while resource value flows, its legacy flows elsewhere."

## Reform at the crossroads


Denyer points to a series of national reforms, including reviews of the Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act, the Future Acts regime, and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Heritage Protection Act, as opportunities to anchor Indigenous equity in the resource economy.

"These reforms are not roadblocks," he says. "They are opportunities for Indigenous businesses to reap the rewards of investment and co-ownership in our mineral reserves."

The review of the Future Acts framework, he says, could shift native title from a defensive instrument into a platform for economic participation.

He also says there has been rising interest from





Australian super funds and international financiers who see projects with cultural certainty and early Indigenous leadership as lower-risk and more investable.

## Pathways to ownership

Denyer outlined three pathways for Indigenous enterprises to move from contracts to capital.

First, they must hold exploration and mining titles rather than subcontract to those who do. Early collaboration, he says, mitigates heritage risk and secures value from the outset.

Second, Indigenous co-ownership in regional infrastructure, processing plants, logistics hubs and renewable systems, can lock wealth into communities.

Third, investment in governance and technical capability will make Indigenous enterprises "investment-grade" and ready to lead.

"Imagine Indigenous businesses undertaking mineral exploration," he says. "When you're exploring, you're not chasing contracts; you're building ownership."

Speaking on the first day of the conference Professor Marcia Langton said: "The capital exists. What we need are pathways to invest it in productive, Indigenous-led ventures."

## From opportunity to equity

Denyer urged governments to back co-investment through the Northern Australia Infrastructure Facility, Indigenous Business Australia and the Future Made in Australia framework rather than rely on short-term grants.

"Government agencies should work with IBA to finance Indigenous-owned assets and ensure policy supports investment-readiness and long-term capability, not just short-term buy-in," he says.

## Building the legacy

Denyer reminded delegates the \$405 billion minerals export economy offers enormous potential if Indigenous businesses can capture even a small share through ownership.

Securing just 1 per cent of that value, he says, would deliver \$4 billion a year in community wealth.

"From contracts to assets. From opportunity to ownership," he says. "That is how Indigenous enterprises will turn today's progress into tomorrow's intergenerational wealth."



Matt Denyer of the Minerals Council of Australia says exploration builds ownership





# Bush being left behind on jobs

Employment growth is city-centric, **David Prestipino** reports

**A**ustralia's most extensive study of Indigenous entrepreneurship has found the sector is expanding rapidly and driving national employment growth, but it says progress is uneven and that remote and regional areas still lag behind.

Released last month, Snapshot 4.0 offers the most detailed look yet at the scale and economic impact of Indigenous businesses and corporations. The study draws on data from the Dilin Duwa Centre for Indigenous Business Leadership in partnership with the Australian Bureau of Statistics and multiple Indigenous business registries and custodians.

According to the report, the Indigenous business ecosystem has emerged as a major employer, a creator of economic opportunities and a driver of Indigenous participation in the labour market. It estimates 135,733 people, 46,718 of whom identify as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander, are employed within Indigenous businesses and corporations.

Dilin Duwa director Associate Professor Michelle Evans says the findings dispel long-held assumptions

about the size and influence of Indigenous enterprise. The sector, she says, is not "some niche group of small businesses". Instead, "[The sector] employs more Australians than the Commonwealth Bank, NAB and Westpac combined."

## IPP a critical entry point

The report highlights the economic momentum generated since the introduction of the Indigenous Procurement Policy in 2015. In the years prior, Indigenous businesses won an average of 3589 contracts annually.

Between 2015-16 and 2018-19, that number rose to 8197 per year, reflecting a 21 per cent increase in average annual spend.

The policy also served as a critical entry point for new Indigenous suppliers.

"An estimated 82 per cent of recipients received their first Commonwealth contract under the IPP," the report says.

Evans says this early exposure proved valuable



**We can't rely on the IPP alone to close the employment gap**

Michelle Evans

beyond the program itself. "We found businesses that win IPP contracts also often win larger contracts outside of the program," she says.

"This suggests experience gained through contracts awarded within the IPP may lead to an increase in contracts won through open tender processes."

The study is clear that Indigenous businesses are not dependent on government work.

Report lead author Associate Professor Cain Polidano says: "The value of contracts won through the IPP represents only 4 per cent of total revenue generated by the sector."





## Entrepreneurial spirit

**The Indigenous business and corporation sector is a major employer of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.**

- In 2021-22, one in three employees in the sector was Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (46,718 out of 135,733 employees)
- In 2021-22, one in five employed Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders worked within the sector



### Employment powerhouse

A central finding from Snapshot 4.0 is the scale of Indigenous business as an employer of Indigenous people. Although the sector represents less than 1 per cent of trading firms, it employs 20 per cent of Indigenous people in the workforce. That proportion is far higher than in any other part of the economy.

"We found that across a diverse range of industries, Indigenous businesses are 12 times more likely to employ an Indigenous worker than non-Indigenous businesses," Evans says. "We show that Indigenous businesses are more inclined to hire Indigenous people,

and the jobs and workplaces those businesses cultivate are better suited to Indigenous employees than roles elsewhere." The study also confirms that Indigenous-owned organisations are more likely to offer full-time and higher-skilled roles. Their workplaces tend to align more closely with cultural and community expectations, which helps support long-term participation. The researchers say: "Two-thirds of the jobs available are in rural and remote areas, which means more opportunities for Indigenous people to work while living on Country." This distribution highlights the importance of Indigenous businesses as regional employers, yet it also underscores the challenge at the heart of Snapshot 4.0.

### Divide widens

Despite strong national growth, the study shows that Indigenous business expansion has not occurred evenly across the country. Growth in remote and regional Australia remains significantly slower than in urban areas.

"Sixty per cent of working-age Indigenous live in rural and remote areas, but employment rates there are lower than in the city," Evans says. Working-age Indigenous employment is 61 per cent in urban areas, compared with 54 per cent in rural locations and 37 per cent in remote communities.

The allocation of IPP contracts explains part of this difference. "As it's a government procurement program, it's natural that a large proportion of IPP contracts are in sectors aligned to government work, like administrative, scientific or technical services," Evans says. "These businesses tend to be in cities, which means more than two-thirds of the value of IPP contracts go to urban areas, generating jobs away from

where those opportunities are needed most." The study finds that contracts are increasing, but the spread is uneven and that many remote communities are yet to see substantial employment benefits.

### Closing the jobs gap

The study's employment findings carry particular significance for the Commonwealth's Closing the Gap targets. Under the national agreement, the federal government has committed to increasing Indigenous employment for people aged 25 to 64 to 62 per cent. Current data shows employment participation at 55.7 per cent.

Evans says progress will depend on understanding the labour market conditions facing Indigenous jobseekers outside the major cities. "If we're going to make up the 6.3 percentage points needed to close the gap on employment participation, we need to understand what the economy looks like for Indigenous people looking for work," she says. "We need to encourage job-creation in areas that meet the needs of the community.

"Our data shows we can't rely on the IPP alone to close the employment gap."

### Moving forward, unevenly

Snapshot 4.0 paints a picture of an Indigenous business sector that is scaling rapidly, diversifying and demonstrating strong economic performance. It also reveals structural divides that procurement alone cannot correct.

The report's findings are likely to sharpen calls for increased focus on regional and remote economic development, improved access to new industries and further investment in place-based job-creation. •



# Croc man finds true meaning



A state agency is opening doors to a growing industry in the bush , writes **Dianne Bortoletto**

**P**roud Yawuru, Karrajari, Nyul Nyul and Bardi (West Kimberley) man Johani Mamid has taken an unlikely career path, one that eventually led him to tourism.

From scraping plates to feeding crocodiles, Mamid's career is as varied as the changing king tides of his hometown of Broome.

He started working life at 16, his first job as a kitchen hand and over the next 20 years, he moved from job to job.

He spent a year as an apprentice panel beater. He's worked in logistics, in pearling, driving mega machinery in mining, doing security work including armed and airport security, in Broome, Perth and Karratha.

"In my 30s, I wanted a job that had more meaning, so I worked as a ranger, but I didn't like the native title politics," he says. "Then I worked with kids at the drop-in centre and found that even more complicated, because in terms in trying to help, it wasn't addressing the bigger problems."

It was Bart Pigram, the only Yawuru tourism business owner in Broome at that time, who encouraged Mamid into the sector. "Bart said that there's plenty of room in the industry and he told me about WAITOC, and as it



## Tourism is a great way to share culture

happened, they'd opened their first tourism business development program, so I applied and was accepted."

WAITOC, the Western Australian Indigenous Tourism Operators Council, established the country's first tourism body with a charter to help develop, promote and support authentic cultural experiences.

In 2019, after WAITOC's guidance with the initial business set up, website, brochures and marketing, Mabu Buru Tours was born.

"You can't just translate language into English because it's contextual rather than one word to

another," Mamid says. "Mabu means good, healthy or positive and Buru means ground, place, country and even time," the 42-year-old says. "To survive in a seasonal industry like tourism, I had to have a part time job, so I became a crocodile feeding guide at Malcolm Douglas Crocodile Park, and I'm still the only licensed Aboriginal tour guide in crocodile tourism."

Mabu Buru Tours is a family business. Relatives are involved as either tour guides, dance performers, helping with coastal foraging, cooking, storytelling or in the Mabu Buru Shop in Broome, which sells Aboriginal tours as well as art, artefacts and souvenirs.

"I set up the Mabu Buru Foundation because I didn't feel comfortable keeping money to myself in the business, so it's there contributing some funds into culture and helping family as needed," Mamid says.

Mamid recently finished a three-year term serving on the WAITOC board and he has been re-elected for another term. He's also on the committee of the First Nations Visitor Economy Partnership to create a national WAITOC equivalent.

"Tourism is a great way to share culture, preserve culture and work on Country with family." •

■ [broomeaboriginaltours.com.au](http://broomeaboriginaltours.com.au)





Wirraka Maya chief executive June Councillor, BHP Port acting general manager Dan Mossman, BHP community principal Belinda Trowbridge and Wirraka Maya Health Service Aboriginal Corporation NDIS manager Emma Cupps

# Healthcare close to home

**W**irraka Maya Health Service Aboriginal Corporation is relaunching its Registered Training Organisation to create new pathways for Pilbara residents to build long-term careers in community health, strengthening a workforce that is increasingly needed across the region. The initiative, supported by a \$3m investment from BHP, will allow people to train locally, remain on Country and deliver culturally informed care to their own communities.

For Wirraka Maya, which has provided community-led health services in Hedland and surrounding areas for 32 years, the relaunch marks a return to developing its own workforce from within the community. Demand for services is growing by 13 per cent annually and it is projected to exceed 55,000 episodes of care within five years, so the organisation sees local training as essential to meeting future need.

CEO June Councillor says strengthening the organisation's local capability will deliver long-term benefits for families, patients and the broader

## Program will allow Pilbara people to learn and work on Country, while strengthening community

community. "Together, we can make a difference not only in our community but in building sustainability in the lives of the families and individuals whom we support," she says.

The Registered Training Organisation will offer qualifications tailored to the Pilbara's needs, beginning with a Certificate IV in Aboriginal Primary Health Care. By the end of the program's second year, 15 students are expected to graduate, before the intake expands significantly. In year three, up to 39 students annually will complete qualifications in health care, community services or business, growing to 63 students each year by year five. Programs in mental health and disability services will also be added as demand increases.

BHP's support for the relaunch was announced at the

Wirraka Maya Community Forum, where acting general manager port Dan Mossman acknowledged the importance of strengthening local training pathways. He said the partnership was focused on creating opportunities that allowed residents to build skills and contribute to long-term community wellbeing.

"This is more than funding. It's about creating opportunity, building local capability and supporting long-term outcomes for the Pilbara," he said.

By restoring a local training pipeline, Wirraka Maya aims to reduce reliance on fly-in, fly-out staffing models and to increase the number of Aboriginal health workers delivering care close to home. The initiative will allow residents to gain qualifications without leaving Country and it will help ensure continuity of care grounded in cultural knowledge and community relationships.

For Wirraka Maya, the relaunch is a strategic investment in the Pilbara's future — one that places community, culture and capability at the centre of regional health development. ●



# Solar to power generations

**T**raditional owners, SunCable and the Northern Land Council have reached a historic multi-generational 70-year agreement to build a 12,000-hectare solar farm on Powell Creek Station.

The NLC says the multimillion-dollar agreement to build the biggest solar farm in Australia will bring multi-generational wealth to traditional owners who hold native title over the earmarked land area.

The NLC says the agreement will deliver "major economic benefits" through jobs, training pathways and local business opportunities in a remote part of the Northern Territory.

"Stringent environmental protection and cultural heritage preservation are also included, so cultural knowledge and connections to land will be protected and will continued to be passed down through generations," the Land Council says.

SunCable first approached the NLC in 2019, and soon after, it engaged with traditional owners about its interests in parts of Powell Creek Station.

In 2022, SunCable identified the land area it wanted to use and negotiations began with traditional owners about options for a land use agreement.

It has been a lengthy process of negotiations between SunCable and more than 200 traditional owners, over the past three years.

The agreement has also been a massive logistical effort from NLC, undertaking over 70 consultations to meet and bring together many families across Darwin, Katherine, Elliott, Tennant Creek and other remote locations.

## The Northern Territory has a plentiful supply of the raw material, writes Giovanni Torre

NLC chairman Matthew Ryan says the council is proud to have negotiated this deal with SunCable on behalf of the traditional owners of Janagirulu, Bamayu and Walanyipirri.

"It sends a clear message that the Northern Territory is open for business. This demonstrates that Aboriginal Territorians are leading the way by participating in genuine engagement with big business," he says.

"This is about strengthening self-determination, building sustainable communities, and contributing to the long-term economic viability of the Northern Territory.

"Over the years, the NLC has facilitated a number of successful business ventures with traditional owners in the Barkly and we look forward to promoting more opportunities towards creating a prosperous future for everyone in the Northern Territory."

Walanyipirri Traditional Owner Peter Henderson says "culture and country is really important to us".

"This deal shows how strong our Native Title is," he says. "We hope other traditional owners can also stand together and negotiate agreements to bring business on their country, just like us."

Bamayu Traditional Owner Linda Benson says: "We

hope this deal can help to improve Elliott, so our families can live and work on Country."

The Land Council says the deal is an example of how large-scale energy projects can be developed in partnership with Aboriginal communities "who want to shape their economic future while continuing to live and work on Country".

SunCable chief executive Ryan Willemsen-Bell says the signing of the Indigenous land use agreement "marks the beginning of an enduring partnership between SunCable, the Northern Land Council and the Powell Creek native title holders to develop this transformative renewable energy project in the Northern Territory".

"This agreement is a symbol of partnership, of shared vision and of mutual respect," he says.

"SunCable is developing one of the largest renewable energy projects in the region, designed to harness the Northern Territory's world-class solar resource to deliver reliable, cost-effective renewable electricity to industrial customers in the Northern Territory and South-East Asia.

"The [Indigenous land use agreement] is the result of years of dialogue, negotiation and trust-building. It ensures that the voices of native title holders are not only heard but are central to the development of this project.

"Throughout the years, SunCable has listened carefully to shape a comprehensive agreement that recognises the importance of Native Title rights and interest that will deliver long term benefits." •



Traditional Owners and the Northern Land Council have signed a 70-year business deal





# Sisterly duo an art force

Images of nature and Country abound on canvas and cotton, writes **Dianne Bortoletto**

**P**ainting with freedom of expression that is deeply connected to her culture and Country, Sarrita King draws inspiration from the beauty around her, blending techniques from the past and the present.

From the age of 16 when she first picked up a paintbrush, Sarrita's artwork has drawn referenced the rhythm of the land, its lightning storms, big rains and shifting sands.

Guided by the teachings of her late father, renowned artist William King Jungala, Sarrita and her older sister Tarris, who is also an artist now living in New Zealand, found success from an early age.

At just 18, Sarrita's first exhibition in Adelaide was a sellout, heralding her as having outstanding promise as an artist. At 31, she was asked to exhibit in Paris.

"To be working and displaying down the hall from greats such as Dali and Picasso was priceless," she says.

Represented by Kevin Murphy, the same manager as their father, the sisters have held exhibitions in London, Rotterdam, Hong Kong and across Australia. Both made the conscious decision to continue their work, individually and together in honour of their father, who died at just 41.

"In the early 2000s, Aboriginal art was becoming a movement, and dad was one of the first urban Aboriginal artists, now called contemporary artists," Sarrita says. "Dad always said 'paint what you love and what you feel. That's how you can connect with people, when you can

tell the story of the art'." The foundation of Sarrita's art is storytelling. "Dad would paint the five elements, water, fire, air, earth and bush, and talk about how it made him feel, like sitting around fire makes you feel warm and safe,"

says the 37-year-old mother

of two. "As Indigenous people, we know about survival. It's integral to us being here, and art is way to be thankful to our ancestors who came before us. I don't paint traditional stories or sacred stories; we didn't grow up that way, but stories that resonate

with me, the childhood memories of the evocative storms."

From high-end galleries to the streets of Darwin, Sarrita's art has evolved.

"When I was travelling constantly to exhibitions and galleries, on the move, on planes, it was killing me not being productive, so I picked up an iPad and started to draw," she says.

Sarrita's digital art library became templates for printing on cotton fabric, which is designed into clothing for men, women and children under the sisters' business, King King Art. "King King is for everyone. We've created designs that are beautiful, meaningful, comfortable and affordable," she says.

King King was showcased at Country to Couture 2025, and they have their sights set on bigger, more prestigious fashion shows in the future.

King King, which includes accessories and homewares, is available online at [kingking.art](http://kingking.art), at selected stockists, and soon, at their first shop scheduled to open in December in Darwin. ●



Sarrita King (top) in one of her designs; King King clothing on exhibition; Tarris and Sarrita (inset) were inspired by the work of their father, William King Jungala.





# R.M. Williams

*Celebrating the* **LITTLE THINGS** *Summer 2025*