The Indigenous Business Review

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Son rising

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CONTENTS

Kingsmill Services
NATIVE TITLE TIES THAT WIN CONTRACTS 4

Closing the Gap
WHY CONTRACTS ALONE DON'T BUILD ECONOMIES 7

Stedman's
SON RISING IN THE TOP END 11

First Nations fashion
GRACE LILLIAN LEE ON OWNERSHIP, NOT VISIBILITY 15

Laauwan Energy
MARILEE LIDDELL SHOUTS IT FROM THE ROOFTOPS 20

Bulabul Battery
WELLINGTON COMMUNITY TAKES AN EQUITY STAKE 23

Seven seasons
THE MOTLOPS SCORE GOALS OFF THE FIELD 24

Procurement Summit
BILLIONS CONCENTRATED IN A FEW FIRMS 27

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The Indigenous Business Review

A contract is not an economy. That distinction runs through this edition, made plainest by First Nations Economics, whose **Rick Macourt** and **Elaine Jolliffe** write that mob cannot subcontract their way to economic sovereignty. Governments fund Aboriginal participation in the economy far more readily than Aboriginal ownership of it.

The numbers from the **Dilin Duwa** Indigenous Procurement Policy summit prove the point. Research presented by **Cain Polidano** found the top 5 per cent of Indigenous firms won 86 per cent of procurement spend but employed 2 per cent of the sector's Indigenous workers, while firms with no federal contracts employed 44 per cent. Spend and community benefit do not always move together. **Naomi Anstess**, who chairs the **National Indigenous Business Chambers Alliance**, says Aboriginal business is not a social program but an economic driver, and the system must mature beyond counting contracts to measuring what reaches communities.

The clearest case is **AMPYR**'s Bulabul battery, where the Wellington Aboriginal community took a 5 per cent equity stake financed against the project's future cashflows and backed by Commonwealth Bank. Not land access. Ownership.

The same instinct runs elsewhere. **Stedman's** keeps jobs in Maningrida. **Kingsmill** has turned native title relationships into mining contracts. **Marilee Liddell** is putting wind turbines on Fortescue's Cloudbreak. **Liandra Gaykamangu** is building her label **LIANDRA** out of Arnhem Land into wholesale markets in the US, on her own terms.

The risk is already visible. **Daniel Motlop** warns that without protection, Kakadu plum could follow the macadamia offshore, an Australian native owned elsewhere and sold back.

Every business profiled in this edition is answering the same question in its own way: not how to just take part in the Australian economy, but how to own a piece of it.

Reece Harley
Managing Editor

The Indigenous Business Review

Connections prove key for family firm

Relationships Benny Woodley forged at native title meetings helped win contracts years later for his business that gives back to community, Dianne Bortoletto reports

Kingsmill Multiplant Joint Venture has secured a major contract to deliver bulk earthworks for Fortescue's Nullagine wind project, which supports the miner's transition from diesel power to renewable energy.

KMJV operates as 50-50 joint venture between Multiplant and Kingsmill Services, a 100 per cent Aboriginal-owned business based in Western Australia, holding direct connections to the Palyku and Banjima Traditional Owner Groups in the Pilbara and the Yued people in the South West.

Kingsmill director Benny Woodley says the company's identity traces back to his great-grandparents, who built their family home on Kingsmill Street in Port Hedland.

"I grew up in Port Hedland with my younger brother and sister. Our backyard was the ocean, and we used to watch the ships come in, and when the tide went out, we'd walk on the reef catching squid and crabs," Woodley says. "We grew up together, and now we own Kingsmill Services together. I'm really proud to be working with my younger siblings and building a business to help the next generation. As a big brother, I am proud to see the confident leaders my younger siblings have become."

Kingsmill Services was established in 2015 after Woodley's mother suggested the children set up a company. "Mum sat us kids down and told us we needed to get a business registered and look at this space. She did all the leg work, set up meetings and did paperwork. All we had to think about was the name," says the father of two.

"My mother was employed with Fortescue in its VTEC program, where she supported and mentored the first Indigenous candidates employed at Cloudbreak as part of the Summit 300 recruitment drive. My father, also a Fortescue employee, developed and co-ordinated VTEC's driver trainer program, where he helped over 350 candidates obtain their driver's licence and go on to full time employment.

"Mum left Fortescue in 2012 to pursue her own business opportunities.

"Back then, Fortescue was supporting a lot of local joint ventures, so she got opportunities in the business space through Fortescue, and she could see the opportunities for us kids."

As a teenager, Woodley spent time in Boorloo / Perth playing footy for Swan Districts in the WAFL. After a bout of homesickness, he moved back to Port Hedland at 18.

At that time, Fortescue was promoting its Summit 300 campaign, a program in Port Hedland to attract 300 local Indigenous employees through VTEC.

"Andrew Forrest was in the community a lot, hosting barbecues and

> I was that kid who was always drawn to the oldies. I would tag along with them whenever I could

KMJV specialises in civil infrastructure, mine site maintenance, crushing services, shutdowns, and bulk and detailed earthworks

such, and mum called and said, 'come and meet Andrew', and I was 18 at the time and thought 'oh yeah, why not'," Woodley says. "Approximately three weeks after meeting and chatting with Andrew, I found myself getting off a plane at the Cloudbreak mine employed as a trainee mobile plant operator learning to operate haul trucks.

That temporary job lasted seven years.

"At first, the rosters were even weeks on and off, then they changed to two weeks on, one week off. One night shift I thought 'I'm too young to do this'. My back hurt, I was tired and I was doing more working than living, so I quit."

Through his father, Woodley had a meeting with Nader El Sayed, owner and managing director of Multiplant, a civil earthworks company.

"We liked each other straight away and started as an unincorporated joint venture," he says.

"We wanted to get to know each other along the journey. That way it'd be an easy exit if things didn't work.

"After a few years working together, we got 'married'! Kingsmill Services and Multiplant became an incorporated entity. Nader has been incredible. He's helped us build our business; he's supported and mentored us."

The partnership with Multiplant enabled the purchase of equipment including a 6 x 4 watercart, a grader, rollers, wheel loaders and light vehicles. Kingsmill Services initially started with plant and labour hire on a small scale.

"It was a tough road. The civil construction industry is competitive. It was hard to get our name and brand out there," Woodley says. "It took two years before we got our first opportunity, which was in 2018. We were contracted for small civil construction works.

"In 2020, we secured long-term contracts in civil construction, but then Covid hit and we were locked in at the contract rates, which had its challenges."

Since then, Woodley has secured contracts directly with mining giants.

He says he was interested in the wisdom of Elders. "I was that kid who was always drawn to the oldies, I liked being around them and would tag along with them whenever I could," he says.

"I grew up going to native title meetings with my mother, and I enjoyed listening to the Elders tell stories and their humour, and I liked the negotiations and seeing how they stood up for themselves and their communities against big corporations.

"When I was 18, I was able to go along to those meetings myself and get involved, which gave me an opportunity to learn and travel through Country.

"And as part of the land use agreements, I'd learn about the corporates' commitments to business opportunities, employment and training and from that I established relationships with them. This was all prior to our business. But those relationships ended up really helping us secure contracts when we did go into business."

In 2025, KMJV won the Indigenous Business Excellence Award at the Hancock Supplier Awards for its work maintaining the railway lines from port operations to the mines, approximately 300 kilometres of rail, as well as and other miscellaneous works.

KMJV provides civil infrastructure, mine site maintenance, crushing services and shutdown personnel. Its fleet and workforce handle bulk and detailed earthworks, including haul roads, construction pads and rehabilitation works. It any also manages crushing and screening for road building materials and concrete recycling.

The partnership aims to build confidence in Indigenous communities by generating employment, facilitating economic independence and preserving culture.

"I'm proud of being able to give back, especially to my parents and grandparents, just spoil them a little bit and look after them," Woodley says.

"The business opportunities have given me one of life's greatest gifts – more precious time with my partner and kids, and I am truly grateful to my business partners, family and clients for believing in us and helping make that possible."

Kingsmills Services also supports sports teams, it sponsors cultural festivals and it drives a Community Entertainment Initiative that brings professional musicians and artists to local events. ●

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Closing the Gap starts at housing

First Nations Economics' **Elaine Jolliffe** and **Rick Macourt** say overcrowing remains a debilitating problem in remote communities and town camps

Treasury counts announcements. Communities count houses.

The budget's $793.7 million Closing the Gap package hides a deeper reality: governments are still more willing to manage the consequences of invasion than eliminate the disadvantage it created.

Announcing a total Indigenous-specific spend of about $1.31 billion on 12 May, this year's budget included substantial investment in remote employment ($299m), community-controlled health ($144.1m in infrastructure upgrades alongside broader health investments), food security ($60.1m combined) and local service delivery across a range of Aboriginal-led programs and initiatives (more than $450m combined). It also confirmed the tightening of Indigenous Procurement Policy rules, requiring businesses accessing the scheme to be at least 51 per cent First Nations-owned and controlled from July 2026.

That reform matters.

For years, Aboriginal businesses have raised concerns about "black-cladding" arrangements, where Indigenous ownership exists largely on paper while economic control and financial benefit flow elsewhere. Stronger integrity settings should help ensure government spending supports genuinely Aboriginal-owned enterprises, but Aboriginal economic value does not flow through one business model alone.

First Nations Economics' Rick Macourt, Leanne Coventry, Madii Page, Elaine Jolliffe and Shaun Cumming

Economies are built on capital, infrastructure, local ownership and the ability of communities to retain and reinvest wealth locally.

Based on publicly reported procurement and program expenditure, an estimated $17.5 billion has flowed into Indigenous business and enterprise development over the past decade. About $13.5 billion is linked to Indigenous Procurement Policy contracting alone.

That has undeniably created opportunity. Aboriginal businesses are participating in infrastructure, consulting, tourism, health and government supply chains at levels that would have been difficult to imagine 20 years ago. The community-controlled sector has become one of the largest Aboriginal employment generators in the country.

But a contract is not the same as an economy.

Governments have become very comfortable funding Aboriginal participation in the economy. They remain far less comfortable funding Aboriginal ownership of it.

Participation in a supply chain is not the same as building intergenerational wealth, and investment in Aboriginal business should sit alongside investment in community control, not substitute for it.

Mob cannot subcontract their way to economic sovereignty.

Strong economies are not built through procurement alone. They are built on capital, infrastructure, housing, local ownership and the ability of communities to retain and reinvest wealth locally.

This is where much of the current policy conversation still feels incomplete.

Aboriginal economic development is too often measured through procurement statistics, participation rates and contract volumes rather

than long-term business sustainability, equity growth and community-owned assets. Yet Aboriginal economic value does not flow through one business model alone.

Community-controlled organisations, Aboriginal businesses and hybrid not-for-profit enterprises all contribute to local employment, capability building and community reinvestment.

In many communities, the community-controlled sector is not simply delivering services. It is the backbone of the local economy: they are major employers, trainers, advocates and economic anchors in regions where few other stable institutions exist.

For more than 80,000 years, Aboriginal economies operated through systems built around reciprocity, responsibility and reinvestment back into collective wellbeing. Modern Aboriginal enterprises are often still attempting to do exactly that: generate commercial activity without severing the relationship between economic success and community obligation.

First Nations Economics' own model attempts to translate ancient ways of doing business that prioritise economic value flowing back into community without compromising mob's economic sovereignty. This economic leadership is still consistently underestimated in mainstream policy settings.

Public policy still tends to assess Aboriginal economic success through largely Western measures of participation rather than long-term community wealth-retention and local economic control.

The result can be an Indigenous enterprise ecosystem that feels heavily dependent on government spending cycles rather than genuinely self-sustaining economic growth.

For mob, these debates are not abstract economic theory.

Stronger Aboriginal businesses mean local jobs, community reinvestment, culturally informed services, stronger regional supply chains and greater control over how wealth moves through community. When Aboriginal organisations and businesses grow sustainably, communities are far better positioned to retain both economic and social value locally rather than watching it leak externally through fly-in-fly-out delivery systems and short-term contracting arrangements. This budget has clearly prioritised operational investment. Some of these measures will make a practical difference in many communities and create opportunities for Aboriginal organisations delivering locally.

But much of this opportunity still sits within contracting environments, rather than long-term business development systems.

And despite larger annual funding packages and growing public investment, most Closing the Gap targets remain off track.

That does not mean investment is failing. Communities absolutely need investment. But it does raise a harder economic question. What exactly is this spending building in the long term?

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples remain one of the youngest and fastest-growing population groups in Australia, placing increasing pressure on housing, infrastructure, health services and local economies. At the same time, many communities are still navigating overcrowding, workforce shortages and underinvestment.

For mob, the issue is no longer simply whether governments are spending money. It is whether that investment is building lasting economic strength, stable housing, stronger local businesses and greater community control.

Our governments continue talking about jobs and productivity, but housing is economic infrastructure.

Stable housing affects everything, from workforce participation, school attendance, family stability, mental health, financial security and even whether someone can realistically start or sustain an enterprise.

In many remote communities across Australia, overcrowding remains an ordinary part of life. Multiple generations continue living in homes never designed for that level of occupancy. Families move between relatives, temporary accommodation and unstable living arrangements simply to stay connected to work, schooling or services.

Yet housing is still too often treated as a social policy issue rather than one of the biggest economic development issues facing First Nations Australia.

The contradiction becomes is sharpest in the Northern Territory, where governments have spent decades

> **Despite larger funding, most Closing the Gap targets remain off track**

responding to the downstream impacts of overcrowding while still struggling to resolve the housing crisis itself.

The Commonwealth and Northern Territory governments have committed billions towards remote housing and town camp upgrades in recent years, including the 10-year, $4 billion remote housing agreement aimed at reducing overcrowding across remote communities.

Yet overcrowding remains severe in many communities and town camps, and housing demand continues to outpace delivery.

At the same time, the Northern Territory government is investing more than half a billion dollars into corrections infrastructure and prison expansion.

That comparison matters because housing is not simply a welfare issue; it is one of the strongest predictors of long-term social and economic participation.

Stable housing improves school attendance, workforce participation, health outcomes and community safety, while overcrowding increases pressure across health, justice and child protection systems.

Governments still tend to spend more mopping the floor of disadvantage than fixing the leak that's flooding the house.

The federal government has clearly prioritised operational investment. The expansion of the Remote Jobs and Economic Development program is one of the largest First Nations-specific measures: $299m has been committed over five years to create more jobs in remote communities. Community-controlled health services also receive significant investment, alongside funding for food security, youth programs and culturally safe family violence initiatives.

These are worthwhile measures. They respond to immediate pressures communities are facing every day.

But there is still a difference between funding programs and building long-term economic power.

The broader issue is whether government investment is genuinely strengthening Aboriginal economies or simply funding short-term delivery within systems that remain externally controlled.

That distinction sits at the heart of this budget.

The government is increasingly willing to fund First Nations-led delivery.

What it still appears less willing to do is shift long-term authority, investment control and economic decision-making closer to communities themselves.

The investment is real. Many of these measures will make a practical difference, particularly in health, remote employment and frontline services. But the deeper structural conditions driving economic inequality remain largely unresolved.

For mob, the measure of economic progress is not found in budget papers or announcement totals.

It is whether families have secure housing, whether young people can stay connected to education, employment and culture, and whether businesses and community-controlled organisations can grow sustainably.

It is whether communities are building long-term economic strength rather than ongoing dependency on short funding cycles.

Because no matter how large the budget announcement sounds in Canberra, it means little if families are still sleeping in overcrowded homes and local economies remain stuck in survival mode. ●

■ *Elaine Jolliffe, pictured left, is a manager at First Nations Economics, and Associate Professor Rick Macourt, pictured right, is managing director of strategy and foundation at First Nations Economics*

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Son rising in the Top End

Stedman Construction & Engineering director Chris Stedman
GEORGIA POLITIS PHOTOGRAPHY

A family company is making its mark in building projects across West Arnhem Land and in Darwin, Reece Harley reports

At 33, Chris Stedman is leading a 42-person construction and engineering business from one of the most challenging operating environments in Australia.

Stedman's Construction and Engineering, founded by his father in Maningrida in 1989, has grown from a remote family business into a significant Indigenous-owned contractor working across West Arnhem Land and, increasingly, in Darwin.

The company's work remains heavily concentrated in Arnhem Land, including Maningrida, Warruwi on South Goulburn Island, Minjilang on Croker Island and Smith Point on the Cobourg Peninsula. But Stedman's has recently expanded into Darwin, bought a warehouse in Humpty Doo and begun taking on more work in the Top End's capital.

"I think we're up to around 42 staff members now, and we're still sitting around that, sort of 45 to 50 per cent Indigenous," Stedman says.

"It's something that we're really proud of and something that I strive to always have at the heart of the company, working alongside our local Indigenous guys in community."

The story of Stedman's is not simply one of business growth. It is an example of how Indigenous-owned contractors in remote Australia can build capability, keep employment local and turn recurring work into a platform for longer-term expansion.

For Stedman, that started with the business his father built.

"My dad started the company back when I wasn't around, and he's laid the foundations of what we are today and we are still working together every day," he says. "Dad is still heavily involved on the tools and in the background of the company."

Stedman worked in the business during school holidays and started his apprenticeship with his father when he was 16.

"I worked with him on and off for about 17 years," he says.

About five or six years ago, Stedman took on majority control of the business.

"We're picking up a lot of government contracts and winning a lot of work and expanding and sort of getting bigger and bigger by the day," he says.

The transition was not without pressure. Stedman was young, and many of the people around the business had worked under his father.

"Me being a younger fellow, telling guys double my age sometimes what to do and what their role was, that was a

GEORGIA POLITIS PHOTOGRAPHY

bit daunting at the start," he says. "But once everybody sort of understood that this young fellow knows what he's talking about and knows what we all need to be doing, that helped."

Before returning to the family business, Stedman worked on larger industrial projects, including the INPEX gas plant and with GEMCO on Groote Eylandt. Those roles gave him exposure to large-scale systems, project discipline and corporate work environments.

"I saw how things are run and saw every aspect of it," he says.

"I think that really helped when I did come back to the company, shaping where I wanted the company to go and how I wanted it to be shaped and run."

Today, the business is built on a mix of maintenance and project work. Stedman estimates the split is about 40 per cent maintenance and 60 per cent project work.

In remote construction, project work can be episodic. Maintenance contracts are different. They provide recurring work, workforce stability and a reason to keep skilled people based in community.

For Stedmans, government housing maintenance has become a commercial anchor.

The company holds maintenance work covering Maningrida, Warruwi and Minjilang, including government employee housing, school housing and remote Indigenous housing.

"The maintenance is an ongoing thing," Stedman says.

"It's never going to finish. The contracts will, but we're always looking at going for those contracts again. So we've always got that stability within the community to employ our local Aboriginal community members."

That stability gives Stedman's the ability to employ and train people from the communities where it operates.

"At the end of the day, if I can train up local guys and bring them up through the ranks and teach them the trades and get them qualified, it's better for the community," Stedman says.

"Money's going back into the community. I'm not having to pay for flights to bring people in."

For Stedman, it is also personal. He grew up in Maningrida and says many of the men now working for the company are people he knew as a young person.

"A lot of the guys now that I grew up with, they're working for us now," he says. "Just having that connection, that value, where we're supporting local and we're not really going anywhere, I think that makes it a lot easier for local community members to approach us and ask us for employment."

Recruitment is often direct. Someone already working for Stedman's may have a younger brother looking for a start. A young person may call or walk in and ask for work.

"All it takes is a phone call or for them to come and see us at work," Stedman says.

"We pretty much sign them up then and there on the spot. We get them some boots and uniforms and get the paperwork filled out. Then they can pretty much start the next day."

He says the company tries to remove barriers rather than create them.

"We understand in community how hard things can be and we just want to be a company that doesn't add to that stress and hardship," he says.

"We just want to be a company that makes it easy. If you'd like a job and you're willing to work, come and chuck the boots on and jump in with us."

One example has stayed with him.

Stedman recalls an Indigenous worker who worked through the wet season, then went to Darwin at the start of the dry. When Stedman rang to ask when he was coming back, the worker told him he would be in the next day.

"He rocks up to work in a brand new car," Stedman says.

"He worked all that wet season and saved up enough money. He was proud as punch. He couldn't take the smile off his face. He earned that money himself and he went and bought a car."

For Stedman, maintenance work is not simply about fixing houses. It also requires judgment, communication and a willingness to engage with the people living in them.

"We do try to do a lot of education while we're in the communities and talking to the local family members," he says. "It's not just going there and repairing it and not engaging with the family members."

He encourages staff to speak with residents and understand their circumstances.

"One of the biggest things that I enforce on the guys is that we're all going into these houses, we're doing the maintenance, but just have a chat with whoever's living in there," he says.

The challenge is often more basic: distance, access and materials.

Maningrida is about 560 kilometres from Darwin. In the dry season, the drive can take six or seven hours. During the wet season, the road is cut off and access is by plane. A weekly barge supplies the whole community, including shops, health clinics, schools and building contractors.

Stedman says the company refers internally to the work as involving "logistical nightmares".

"Some of the biggest logistical nightmares," he says, are "making sure that we're on top of all our materials" and "making sure that we don't run out."

"You've got to make sure you've got enough stock in community so that when we do get an emergency job, we can go there and we know we've got all the right stock on hand to complete the job, keep the tenants safe and keep everyone happy."

In that environment, logistics become part of the product. A contractor with materials, vehicles, plant and local knowledge already in place has an advantage over one trying to mobilise from outside.

That has shaped Stedman's investment in plant and equipment. The company now has trucks, trailers, road trains, concrete batching capacity, loaders, excavators and other machinery.

Chris Stedman, left, with one of his big rigs; Stedman and family in Darwin, above; Stedman and his team after finishing a job in Maningrida, right

Stedman describes a conservative growth model: win the work, complete the job, reinvest in capability, then take on the next stage.

"We've been able to do the contracts and be rewarded and been able to go out and buy the machines that we need," he says. "We sort of just tend to do the projects and then purchase what we need for the next projects, or whatever we need to add to the fleet."

Asked what he would change to make it easier for remote businesses, Stedman's answer is practical.

"I'd like to say that probably 80 per cent of them would probably say the same answer," he says, pointing to "road access" and "road conditions".

"It takes a lot of wear and tear on our heavy machinery and our vehicles," he says.

Better-maintained roads, he says, would reduce "breakdowns and delays" in getting materials out to remote worksites.

Stedman's project work has also grown. In Maningrida, the company recently completed the community's changerooms and football grandstand, a project Stedman says had visible local impact.

"That was a massive community event," he says.

"We finished it and then the Sydney Swans came out for one of the openings. It brought a lot of people together, especially because I had a lot of local Indigenous guys working on that project with us."

For those local workers, the project was visible in a way many construction jobs are not.

"For them to be working there, pretty much in the centre of town, and for their family members to be walking past and seeing them," Stedman says, there was pride in being able to say, "I'm helping build this."

In Darwin, the company is completing work at Howard Springs defence accommodation, including carports over 28 car parks and a large bus shelter to house two buses during the wet season.

The company's current workload remains about 70 per cent Arnhem Land and 30 per cent Darwin. Over the next five to 10 years, Stedman says he would like to add another 10 or 20 staff in Darwin and build a stronger pipeline across civil works, new builds, maintenance and project delivery.

For now, he is focused on controlled growth.

"Head down, bum up," he says.

"We're wanting to continue to keep the good name and the good reputation of the works that we are doing, keep pricing works and continue doing what we're doing."

For young people thinking about their own future, Stedman's advice is practical.

"The biggest thing, and my philosophy, is find something that you really enjoy and you don't call it work," he says.

"I really enjoy what I do. I enjoy all the interactions. I enjoy the headaches. I enjoy the hiccups."

He says it can be difficult to find work that feels meaningful, but young people should keep going until they find the thing that suits them.

Stedman's growth is not built on a separation between commercial success and community responsibility. In remote construction, the two are closely linked. The company's advantage is its local workforce, its equipment, its relationships and its ability to remain present in places where outside contractors often come and go.

For Stedman, that is both the inheritance of the business his father started and the foundation for its next stage.

"We're supporting local," he says.

"And we're not really going anywhere." ●

"Telling guys double my age what to do and what their role was, that was a bit daunting

Sharing culture through community.

Challenge accepted.

In Roebourne, artists of Ngarluma and Yindjibarndi Country are sharing stories that reflect culture, identity and connect to Country.

Where We Come From is a community-led exhibition developed with FORM and supported by Woodside, strengthening knowledge and understanding of culture in the Pilbara and across Western Australia.

In 2025 the exhibition attracted more than 3,300 visitors, who engaged in storytelling, workshops and cultural learning.

Scan the QR Code to read Woodside's 2025 Social Contribution Report

Sharon Warrie, Art Development Camp. Perth 2025. Photo by Marnie Richardson courtesy of FORM.

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First Nations Fashion + Design's Reclamation runway, on the sidelines of Australian Fashion Week in Sydney in May 2026

The three threads key to industry's success

Leaders in fashion say the sector needs backing beyond he starting point of their innovative designs, Reece Harley reports

After years of breakthrough runway moments, First Nations fashion is entering a more demanding phase. The next test is whether the sector can build the capital, infrastructure and commercial systems needed to turn recognition into lasting economic power.

For much of the past decade, First Nations fashion has often been understood through its most visible moments: the runway, the campaign, the fashion week debut, the award, the landmark "first".

Those moments opened doors that had long been closed. They gave designers, artists, models and makers national platforms. They helped force the Australian fashion industry to recognise the depth of creative talent that had rarely been properly resourced or centred.

But for many First Nations fashion leaders, visibility is no longer enough.

Across three different parts of the sector, First Nations Fashion + Design founder Grace Lillian Lee, LIANDRA founder and creative director Liandra Gaykamangu, and Ngali founder Denni Francisco are describing the same underlying challenge. The future of First Nations fashion will require infrastructure, capital, production capability, export pathways, cultural governance and genuine long-term commercial partnerships.

Lee, the founder of First Nations Fashion + Design, says the organisation's recent Reclamation runway, on the sidelines of Australian Fashion Week in May was important because it asserted space, narrative and ownership within an industry where First Nations creatives have been invited in temporarily rather than supported to lead.

"FNFD was created because there has always been extraordinary First Nations talent in this country, but very little infrastructure designed to support it long-term," she says.

That distinction between talent and infrastructure sits at the centre of the sector's next phase.

For Lee, the problem is systemic. First Nations people have often been included in fashion through visibility, diversity initiatives or cultural consultation, but not necessarily through positions of ownership, leadership or economic control. FNFD's model is designed to shift that balance by building First Nations leadership across governance, curation, casting, styling, creative production, business development and storytelling.

It is also deliberately broader than fashion presentation. Lee describes cultural safety, social and emotional wellbeing, inclusion and belonging as key to the organisation's infrastructure. FNFD is majority female-led. Women hold central roles in leadership, production and creative teams.

In fashion terms, infrastructure also means production houses, wholesale showrooms, studios, logistics, training pipelines and capital. That is why Lee is cautious about short-term support that is heavy on branding but light on

Left from above: A Ngali design; Liandra Gaykamangu; a Liandra design; First Nations Fashion + Design founder Grace Lillian Lee; FNFD + Design's Reclamation runway, Australian Fashion Week in Sydney in May; Ngali fashion brand founder Denni Francisco

legacy. FNFD has partnerships with organisations including Epson, Creative Australia, Indigenous Capital Limited, Oranges and Sardines, and Artspace. Lee says the meaningful partnerships are those that move beyond symbolic support and invest in long-term capability, leadership and systems change.

The ambition is to build something permanent. FNFD has established a Community Hub in Gimuy, Cairns, as a culturally safe environment where creatives can develop professionally while feeling supported personally, socially and culturally. It is also working with Artspace as part of its plan to grow Reclamation into an annual First Nations Fashion Festival by 2027, with potential links to tourism, education, international exchange, export markets and the broader creative economy. "There is a real opportunity for Australia to position itself globally through First Nations-led contemporary fashion, storytelling and cultural innovation," Lee says.

For LIANDRA, the same shift is playing out through wholesale, export and market positioning.

Liandra Gaykamangu, a Yolngu woman from East Arnhem Land and the founder and creative director of LIANDRA, has built the brand from the Northern Territory into a label now pursuing national and international wholesale growth. LIANDRA's official profile describes the business as rooted in Aboriginal Australian culture.

Gaykamangu says securing national and international wholesale representation required a deeper understanding not only of product, but of the business architecture behind the brand. It meant understanding the difference between a direct-to-consumer customer and a wholesale buyer, knowing product margins, sampling costs, production costs and freight and ensuring the systems behind the business were ready to scale.

The US is a particular focus. Gaykamangu sees the US as a market that still validates both fashion product and commercial potential. Research trips to Miami Swim Week and New York Fashion Week helped clarify the opportunity: Miami reinforced LIANDRA's natural fit in resortwear, swim and lifestyle, while New York pointed to the possibility of evolving into a broader contemporary fashion space.

In that market, Gaykamangu does not want LIANDRA to be boxed into a narrow category. She sees it as a contemporary resortwear brand with a luxury-adjacent feel, grounded in fashion, storytelling and culture. The brand is proudly Indigenous Australian, but she sees that identity as the foundation of the business rather than the totality of its market positioning. The goal is to be recognised as a globally relevant fashion brand with a distinctive cultural lens, strong design identity and deep connection to place.

Wholesale, however, demands discipline. It requires long lead times, consistent delivery, pricing structures, production systems, forecasting, sampling, manufacturing relationships and an ability to build collections that

work across markets. Gaykamangu says wholesale success relies as much on execution as design.

That commercial discipline has been shaped by geography. LIANDRA has had to build global pathways from Darwin, outside the traditional centres of Australian fashion. Gaykamangu says agility and innovation have come from necessity, including the need to reach customers and buyers globally from a remote base and create pathways into rooms where brands like hers have historically been under-represented.

Yet the international ambition remains tied to local impact. Gaykamangu says LIANDRA is not only a fashion label, but also a platform for visibility, opportunity and creative pathways for First Nations people. As the brand expands internationally, she wants that growth to strengthen opportunities for First Nations creatives, collaborators and communities back home rather than pull the business away from its origins.

Ngali founder Denni Francisco brings another perspective: the hard economics that sit behind fashion's public glamour. Ngali describes itself as a fashion brand dedicated to quality, sustainability and storytelling, collaborating with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists to translate artworks into premium garments and collectibles. Creative Victoria has described Francisco as a designer who has built Ngali into a platform for First Peoples artists, designers and creatives.

She says one of the biggest challenges she underestimated was the gap between vision, demand and the capital needed to execute opportunities at scale. Fashion, she says, is resource-intensive and cashflow-heavy, particularly in Australia, where manufacturing, freight and operating costs are high.

Ngali's solo runway at Australian Fashion Week in 2023 remains one of the most affirming moments of the brand's development. For Francisco, the milestone was not only about garments. It brought together 22 First Nations creatives across accessory weaving, footwear design, runway design, modelling, graphic art and music composition, making visible the collective ecosystem behind the brand.

But Francisco is clear that visibility does not automatically produce sustainability. For small labels, the hardest issues are often hidden behind the runway: local manufacturing constraints, large minimum order quantities, rising operational costs, inventory risk, wholesale margins, freight, staffing and marketing. Smaller production runs can increase unit costs, while larger runs can force brands to overstock and tie up working capital.

Cashflow is the central pressure. Brands must often pay for production, freight, staffing and marketing long before revenue returns, while wholesale terms can delay payments further. Francisco says the problem is the way every part of the business is connected.

Her critique is sharpest when it comes to performative support. Fashion weeks, awards, grants and media coverage can open doors and build credibility, but without resources for marketing, production, wholesale infrastructure and supply, visibility can remain symbolic rather than commercial.

"Representation matters, but sustainable participation matters even more," Francisco says. That line could serve as a thesis for the broader sector.

For Francisco, the responsibility of First Nations fashion is also cultural. Ngali's model is not about taking artwork and placing it onto garments. It is about relationships, consultation, permission and dialogue, ensuring artists and communities remain connected to the outcomes of their work. The possibility lies in turning that responsibility into new economic pathways, royalties, collaborations and international storytelling.

Taken together, the three leaders describe an industry at a point of transition. The first phase was recognition. The next phase is ownership.

That means First Nations fashion should not be treated as a niche, a cultural moment or a seasonal diversity feature. It is an emerging business sector with export potential, tourism potential, intellectual property value, employment pathways, training needs and capital requirements.

It also asks questions of the Australian industry. Who owns the platforms? Who funds the infrastructure? Who benefits when First Nations culture becomes commercially attractive? Who carries the risk when a small label is asked to scale? Who ensures artists and communities share in the value?

The opportunity is significant. Conscious consumers are looking for brands with purpose, authenticity, sustainability and meaning. International markets are seeking stories with depth and distinction. First Nations fashion offers all of that, and something more: a way of connecting design, Country, culture, community and commerce.

But the future can't be built on applause alone. If First Nations fashion is to become a durable part of the creative economy, it will need patient capital, production support, export development, culturally informed governance, ethical partnerships and buyers who see the value of these brands extends beyond the garment.

The runway may still be the place where the public sees the work. The business of fashion is what determines whether that work endures. ●

The Indigenous Business Review

OPINION | JYI LAWTON

Disruption of fuel price surge is felt way beyond the bowser

Right now, one issue is hitting everyone: from filling up at the bowser to running a business, fuel and its rising cost are a real problem.

When conflict escalates near Middle Eastern shipping routes, particularly around corridors like the Strait of Hormuz, it can cut supply and create uncertainty. Ships are delayed, insurance costs rise, and in some cases, supply routes are avoided altogether.

That uncertainty drives up global oil prices. Australia imports most of its refined fuel, so when global prices rise, we feel it. For most households, higher fuel prices mean tighter budgets. For Indigenous businesses in the resources sector, it goes much further. Fuel is not just a line item on the P&L: it is a core input, and for the resource sector, we are talking large quantities. Fuel powers machinery onsite, it keeps vehicles moving across vast distances, it drives generators in remote operations. It underpins logistics, freight and supply chains. When fuel prices spike, every part of the operation becomes more expensive.

For many of the Indigenous businesses that are a part of Aboriginal Enterprises in Mining, Energy and Exploration's network, there is no alternative. The work still needs to get done. WRL Shipping managing director Kira Seeley sees this first-hand. WRL Shipping is an Indigenous-owned logistics and freight company specialising in moving heavy machinery, equipment and oversized cargo across Australia and internationally. It is seeing increased shipping costs, longer transit times and the added complexity of navigating global conflict zones, particularly through the Middle East. Routes that were once straightforward now come with risk, delays and higher insurance premiums.

As Seeley says: "Fuel volatility is not just a line item increase. It fundamentally shifts how projects are priced, planned and delivered. What we are seeing is a layering effect, with higher bunker costs, disrupted schedules, congestion and rising insurance premiums compounding simultaneously.

"Greater transparency in fuel mechanisms, more flexible contracting models and a clearer recognition of regional cost realities will be critical. Indigenous businesses are delivering essential capability across the resources sector. Ensuring they are not disproportionately exposed to global volatility is not just a commercial issue, it is a sustainability issue for the sector."

For businesses relying on the timely movement of equipment into projects, those delays and added costs can have serious consequences.

Volatility is likely to continue and for everyday Australians, that means continued pressure at the bowser. For Indigenous businesses, particularly those in resources, it means ongoing cost pressures that directly affect growth, sustainability and opportunity.

Understanding the global forces at play is important because what happens on the other side of the world does not stay there. ●

■ *Jyi Lawton, inset, is a Bidjara man and the CEO of AEMEE, an Indigenous led body representing Indigenous businesses in Australia's resources sector.*

Getting dirty and giving back

Training is key in the Tambal story, and so is the Friday barbecue, **Callan Morse** reports

In Western Australia's Great Southern region, an Indigenous-owned and female-led training and labour hire firm is assisting mob enter the state's mining, civil and earthworks sectors.

Tambal Solutions, based near Albany, utilises Aboriginal-owned land to hold industry-recognised training courses that are supporting the career development of Indigenous and non-Indigenous participants.

Founded by Noongar woman Penny Williams, Tambal offers earthworks and civil contracting, labour hire and cultural support but a key element of its business operations is the delivery of Aboriginal-led training courses on a 485 hectare family owned sheep property.

Williams says Tambal Solutions is named after her family's personal journey through the area.

"The concept was our own family's journey from Tambellup to Mount Barker to Albany, and it's abbreviated Tambal," Williams tells The Indigenous Business Review. "In that journey, my parents sought to keep moving to different locations for opportunities for their children, including employment, education and sport.

"It was very holistic with what they were trying to provide for us, so that's pretty much what Tambal represents."

After 18 years in the mining industry with Rio Tinto, Williams says she became aware of the lack of opportunity for young people in WA's south, which inspired her to establish Tambal.

Tambal Solutions founder Penny Williams; and, above, Samara Williams

"I could see the disparity happening back home and people not having those opportunities," she said.

"You just didn't see many Noongar people or Aboriginal people in the civil sector, as well as construction."

Noticing the disadvantage faced by southern mob and while utilising her mining experience and training, Williams founded Tambal in 2022 with the support of her husband, Scott, son, Steven, and daughter, Samara, who collectively manage in-field operations.

"I thought someone like myself who has had access to these opportunities could come back to town and, in a culturally safe fashion, be able to share and work with local Aboriginal people in the community," Williams says.

While most of Tambal's training graduates are Indigenous, Williams says the company takes on students "from all walks of life".

"If we can help, we will help."

Leading Tambal's training department is Williams' daughter, Samara, who puts to use her years of experience with BHP to mentor the next generation of operators form the state's south.

The Menang woman says that through Tambal, she feels a strong sense of community contribution after nearly a decade of fly-in, fly-out work in WA's north. "I didn't see myself working for such a big corporation for much longer when I could be coming home and pouring all my knowledge into our community," she says.

Samara says Tambal prides itself on offering tailored training solutions based on a client's individual requirements.

"We will create a package depending on the required number of machines, and make a program based around those," she says.

"Typically, it's a maximum of four machines, so we can have up to 10 people in a classroom, and then have a circuit over the course of four weeks."

Samara says with the high percentage of Aboriginal participants, Tambal ensures it offers culturally safe training, including opportunities for participants to have a yarn on Country.

"Being on the farm, on our Country, with our own mob, in a safe place with people that they trust and that they're growing and learning with, I think that offers a lot of support," she says.

Tambal goes the extra mile for its training participants by offering transport support and a "mandatory" Friday barbecue — where culture meets cuisine — to celebrate the week's learning.

Samara says leading Tambal's training makes her feel extremely proud of mob entering the earthwork industry, while giving her a renewed sense of purpose.

"The commitment and the excitement and the effort actually being put in, and the attendance is also very good," she says. "And if I can help people grow and learn or create opportunities and open pathways for anyone, I feel like I'm doing what I'm meant to be doing here." ●

Shout it from the rooftops

A dynamo and her turbines could bring power to the people, **Brendan Foster** reports

First Nations entrepreneur Marilee Liddell hopes to change people's attitudes towards using clean energy, one rooftop wind turbine at a time.

A descendant of the Worora and Nyul-Nyul people from the Kimberley region, Liddell started Laauwan Energy Solutions Australia in 2024 with business partner Robert Craig because she wanted to provide greater power, reliability and accessibility for mob in the community, especially in remote areas.

The Boorloo/Perth-based renewable energy company is the premier retailer of the Archimedes Spiral Wind Turbine in Western Australia.

The compact turbine is designed to capture wind from multiple directions efficiently while remaining quiet and bird-friendly.

Liddell says she went to South Korea in early 2025 to see the research, development and wind-tunnel testing of the turbines first-hand.

"When you talk about wind turbines, people's minds automatically go to the wind farms, so we tell people it's for the rooftop, and it's very quiet," she said.

"It's less than 43 decibels, which is what we speak at, and it's environmentally friendly.

"The wind turbine is our primary product, and we highlight it because it's a point of difference and you actually save money on your power if you have the right system set up."

The 55-year-old said the rooftop turbines would be ideal for many First Nations communities that rely on expensive prepaid electricity cards to access energy. Not to mention its use in some of the remote Indigenous housing, which is poorly built and poorly insulated.

Liddell was also shocked to learn that several isolated First Nations communities were still relying on inefficient diesel back-up power.

"It's costly, it's dangerous, it can be a hazard, and it can be dangerous in communities as well," she tells The Indigenous Business Review.

"And even transporting it is dangerous, as well as being environmentally challenging."

Beyond the flagship spiral wind turbine, the business also offers several add-ons, including the company's wind and solar hybrid controller, a crucial component in renewable energy systems.

There's also the on-grid brake-inverter, which helps connect small wind turbines to the grid.

However, Liddell says one of the challenges with any renewable technology is convincing mob to use it. But she says those barriers also exist for non-Indigenous people.

"I think it's all about knowledge and information," she says. "Some people can see the vision, while some can't.

"I think once people understand the concepts, and it's doing things a little bit differently, [they will see the benefit].

"But it's a major disrupter and a game-changer."

Since the business started two years ago, Liddell has been pounding on the doors of governments and private investors, trying to sell the rooftop wind turbines.

> **As an Aboriginal woman, you have to prove twice as hard that you can do something**

Laauwan Energy Solutions Australia business partners and founders Robert Craig and Marilee Liddell

While she received the standard reply, "we will get back to you in two weeks", Liddell refused to take no for an answer because she is passionate about the product.

Eventually, the company was offered the opportunity to install systems at Fortescue Metals Group's flagship iron ore mining operation, Cloudbreak, in the Pilbara. She hopes it's the start of something big.

"You just got to keep going. Especially if you believe in the product, it will happen," she says.

"I've worked at BHP; I've worked across most of the big four in some shape or form, and they all have diesel generators running things.

"It's been bloody hard to get the miners to embrace that it's a proven concept, and recently we had some systems put out in Cloudbreak.

"We ran the three dongers, an office block, crib room and ablutions block all fitted with solar battery and wind turbines out there."

Liddell, who has more than 25 years' experience in Aboriginal community engagement and the mining, oil and gas industry, says that getting through the doors of big business and government can at times be more challenging as a First Nations woman entrepreneur.

"I always get the 'what do you know about energy?'," she says.

"I guess from a woman's point of view, and an Aboriginal woman as well, you have to prove twice as hard that you can do something.

"I think it's just the nature of the beast at the moment, but I think that dial is shifting; it's just going to take some time."

The former regional women's adviser for the Aboriginal Torres Strait Islander Commission says now is the perfect time for First Nations people to be part of Australia's clean energy revolution.

Especially since the launch of the federal government's first-ever First Nations Clean Energy strategy in late 2024, which recommended placing Indigenous Australians at the centre of the country's energy transformation.

"We need to sit at the table when it comes to energy and renewables," Liddell says.

"For many years, we've been left out of the conversations, and for many years, we've just been told what to do.

"But we can change those dynamics by having a seat at the table." ●

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Plugged in to the future

A large-scale battery energy storage project has won the backing of Commonwealth Bank, **Reece Harley** reports

AMPYR Australia's Bulabul Battery project in central west NSW

A First Nations equity arrangement at AMPYR Australia's Bulabul Battery project in central west NSW is being held up as a potential model for Aboriginal ownership in Australia's clean energy transition.

The large-scale battery energy storage project, located near Wellington on Wiradjuri Country, is being developed by AMPYR Australia. Wambal Bila Limited, representing the Wellington Aboriginal community, has secured the right to acquire a 5 per cent equity stake in the first stage of the project.

Chris McKendrick, an advisory and transactions partner with Yamagigu Consulting, says the transaction is significant because it is not driven by an existing native title agreement, land access agreement or Indigenous land use agreement.

The project land is privately owned, meaning the equity arrangement was not simply the result of a legal requirement tied to land tenure.

"The challenge was, how we then carve out equity participation for community," McKendrick says.

He says AMPYR deserves credit for seeking to involve the Wellington Aboriginal community and for helping "shift that dial from land rights into economic rights".

The structure is significant because it gives the community a pathway into project ownership, rather than limiting its involvement to consultation, employment targets or one-off benefit payments.

McKendrick says the developer began discussions with representatives of the Wellington Aboriginal community in late 2024. The project reached financial close in June 2025. At that stage, the community signed a call option agreement, giving it the right, but not the obligation, to seek the 5 per cent equity interest at a later date.

That also gave the community time to secure financing for its equity position.

The financing structure is central to the deal. Rather than requiring the community to put up land or other assets as security, the financing was supported by the project's future cashflows.

McKendrick says Yamagigu was able to review the underlying models supporting the project so that Wambal Bila could take those assumptions to Commonwealth Bank.

"CBA determined that the model essentially was a bankable model," he says.

"The community didn't have a balance sheet. They couldn't put up other assets to provide security."

He says the task was getting the bank sufficiently comfortable with the projected cashflows from the project and using those cashflows to support the financing required for the First Nations equity component.

Yamagigu's role was adviser to Wambal Bila and project manager on the debt raise.

McKendrick says the firm's role included working alongside Wambal Bila's legal advisers to translate the complexities of the deal for community board members, while also translating the board's needs and requirements back to the bank.

"We didn't have an overly sophisticated board. The board wasn't made up of finance heads," he says.

"It was members out of the community, respected members out of the community."

McKendrick says securing the right advisers was important to ensure the board could make an informed decision about whether to take on the financing.

The transaction comes as federal policy begins to move in a similar direction. The Commonwealth's Capacity Investment Scheme is expected to include stronger incentives for First Nations equity and revenue-sharing arrangements in renewable energy projects.

McKendrick says Yamagigu's analysis suggested between $5 billion and $12bn in capital could be needed over the next decade to support First Nations equity participation in clean energy projects.

He says the scale of the opportunity is significant, as it is expected that a large proportion of clean energy projects will be developed on land under the care or control of First Nations groups.

For developers, McKendrick says the lesson from Bulabul is that First Nations equity should be seen as a way to reduce project risk, not add to it.

"Having a First Nations group at the table with you will help de-risk your project," he says. "It will mean that you are on the same page much earlier, you are collaborating earlier, your approvals should be smoother, your relationship will be smoother."

He says Yamagigu was already seeing a pipeline of similar opportunities in renewable energy, as well as other infrastructure sectors.

"This is hopefully the new norm," McKendrick says. "This is about lifting expectations and this is now the benchmark." ●

The Indigenous Business Review

Scoring goals off the field

After football, it's time for a tipple, **David Prestipino** reports

One of football's most famous families, the Motlops, are creating a legacy off the field, on Country with bushfoods.

The Motlop name is synonymous with Australia's own football code, but it may turn out to be as prominent in restaurants and markets across the country for generations to come.

Daniel and Steven, along with their older brother Shannon and cousin Marlon, thrilled modern-day football fans across 416 AFL games between them.

But it is Daniel and Steven's businesses, including Seven Seasons and Something Wild, that are now the main family affair.

Daniel says the idea for the business grew from his upbringing in Darwin, where native ingredients and connecting with Country were part of everyday life.

One of the company's signature ingredients, green ants, comes directly from his childhood experience.

"Growing up in the Top End, green ants were just part of life. We'd eat them as kids and people used them in tea," Daniel says. "Our parents and grandparents took us out bush all the time. We learnt about hunting, fishing and native ingredients from a young age. It was just part of our culture and part of growing up in Darwin."

Motlop launched Seven Seasons about eight years ago as an extension of the family's native food business, Something Wild.

"We wanted to expand into drinks and spirits and create more commercial demand for native ingredients, and Green Ant Gin was the first product we launched," Daniel says.

"We realised they had these incredible citrus notes, so we decided to use them in gin."

The business focuses on ingredients that are sustainable, abundant and that can be harvested by Indigenous communities across the north. "Everything is seasonal, so building reliable supply chains is important, but we also want Aboriginal people harvesting ingredients and benefiting from the products," Daniel says.

Seven Seasons often designed products around specific regions and communities.

"Bush apples, for example, are harvested around Maningrida, so we developed that product specifically to support harvesting opportunities in that area," Daniel says.

He says the transition to the native food industry felt like a natural progression after football. The Seven Seasons business now enjoys retail relationships with major chains like Dan Murphy's and Coles.

"The distribution has been huge for us. Having national retailers backing the product means people can access it almost anywhere," he says.

Those commercial relationships forged in the early days were strengthened during Covid lockdowns, when bars and venues were closed.

The turning point that inspired Daniel to harvest native ingredients after his AFL retirement in 2011 came in 2016, after a chance meeting at a restaurant with the late chef Jock Zonfrillo.

The business took flight when Danish chef Rene Redzepi visited Darwin ahead of a Noma Australia pop-up in Sydney in 2016, and asked Daniel to guide them through native ingredients on Country.

"That was one of the moments where I realised there was a real future in this industry," Daniel says. "Anyway, so we were in the bush with Rene and Jock but we weren't catching anything.

"When you take people out bush, you've got no real plan, things just have to happen for it to be a good experience.

"Then a green ant crawls on me. We've known about green ants all our lives but we never thought to sell them.

"I said 'Oh, try this Rene', and he goes, 'Wow, everyone come here, taste this ant'. Then it ends up on their menus."

The delicacy was given a fresh twist as the key ingredient in Green Ant Gin, adding a citrus zest to Seven Seasons' flagship flavour since 2017.

"We have seven seasons in Darwin or the Larrakia, which is our grandmother's country," Daniel said of the origin for the name for the Motlops' distillery.

"Most Indigenous communities around Australia have six or seven seasons.

"It's not based around a calendar or dates; it's when certain flowers blossom, when native ingredients pop up, when we harvest the ants at certain times of the year for sustainability."

The popular Green Ant Gin was a turning point for the Motlops as they diversified their businesses to target

Daniel Motlop, main picture, on the lookout; above left ingredients fresh from nature; below left, harvesting bush honey for the Bush Honey and Wattleseed Coffee Liqueu

high-profile restaurants and international chefs, as well as consumers and tourists.

The Seven Seasons range now includes Bush Apple Gin, Native Yam Vodka, Bush Honey and Wattleseed Coffee Liqueur and the just-released Paperbark Honey Whisky.

The Motlop brothers are spread across the supply chain. Daniel is in Adelaide, Steven is in Darwin and Shannon is involved in the harvesting, often with children in tow.

The community on Larrakia Country, the Motlops' traditional land around Darwin, also reap the rewards as the brothers ensure money flows back to the harvesters.

While most high-end venues incorporate native ingredients of some kind on their menus, be it in pastas, sashimi or other cuisines, Daniel Motlop is concerned Indigenous businesses make up only a small proportion of the native food supply chain.

"Aboriginal businesses account for about 5 per cent of the native food industry, which is disappointing. There's still a lot of room for growth," Daniel says.

The 44-year-old is also concerned about the long-term ownership and protection of native Australian ingredients, pointing to the example of macadamias.

"The macadamia is a native Australian ingredient, but now a lot of the industry is overseas-owned and the product is effectively being sold back to us," he says. "We don't want the same thing happening with ingredients like Kakadu plum."

Daniel believes stronger protections and better systems are needed to ensure Indigenous communities benefit from the commercial success of native foods.

"We haven't done enough to protect native flora and fauna or make sure the benefits flow back to communities," he says. ●

INDUSTRY SNAPSHOT 2020–2025

The Indigenous bush food sector in Australia has shifted from a niche bush tucker market into a fast-growing premium food, beverage and wellness category over the past several years.

Demand has been driven by consumer interest in native ingredients, sustainability, provenance and Indigenous cultural knowledge.

Products such as Kakadu plum, lemon myrtle, finger lime, wattleseed and bush tomato are now appearing in mainstream retail, hospitality, tourism and export channels and they are big business.

From a business perspective, the sector has experienced strong growth but remains relatively small.

Data gathering has not been on speed with the sector's rise in popularity, but industry estimates valued the native foods sector at about $82 million around 2019–20. Early forecasts suggest it would double in value by the mid-2020s.

A 2020 report examining 13 native plants, all with a long history of use in Aboriginal communities, had estimated the industry would be worth $140 million in 2025.

Companies tied to Indigenous supply chains are attracting investment and partnerships, especially in northern Australia. The industry is looking beyond food to beer, spirits, and now cosmetics, nutraceuticals and pet products, all using native botanicals.

KAKADU PLUM

Australia's native food industry was valued at $81.5 million in 2019-20 (University of Sydney). The Kakadu plum is a major player in the sector for its wellness and dietary benefits. Chefs love them too.

Larrakia harvester Shannon Motlop's business Aboriginal Community Harvest recently received one of the company's biggest single Kakadu plum buys of the year.

The order by Adelaide-based Creative Native Foods, owned by proud Wiradjuri woman and entrepreneur Terri-Anne Daniel, secured one of the season's final hauls of Australia's most famous native superfood for chefs and home cooks.

One of Australia's largest distributors of native ingredients, Creative Native's order exemplified its commitment to work with Indigenous harvesters and ensure native food remained in Indigenous hands.

Shannon's business also works with Traditional Owners and holds harvesting permits across the region, including with the Bawinanga Aboriginal Corporation in West Arnhem Land.

The Creative Native order was harvested by hand during the Larrakia season of Damibila, one of seven, when bush fruits ripen across WA, NT and Queensland.

Known as damiyumba to the Larrakia people and also billy goat plum, the Kakadu plum has been harvested for thousands of years.

It is one of the world's most nutrient-dense fruits, exceptionally rich in vitamin C and antioxidants. It contains 100 times the vitamin C content of oranges

The plum has long been valued as food and traditional medicine. It is often eaten fresh from the tree, or stored for cooking or longer journeys.

Today, leading chefs from across the country use it in vinaigrettes, sorbets, syrups, butters and chocolate.

The plum has also been used in health, beauty and skincare products, including several French brands.


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The Dilin Duwa National Summit; below, Professor Michelle Evans
PICTURES: JORGE DE ARAUJO

Next steps to opportunity

Procurement policy needs to enter its latest chapter with a critical eye on community impact, Reece Harley reports

A national Indigenous procurement summit in Melbourne has heard the first decade of the Indigenous Procurement Policy opened major new markets for First Nations businesses, but the next phase will be defined by harder questions about ownership, verification, community accountability and whether contract spend is producing broadbased economic benefit.

The Unlocking Opportunity summit, hosted by the Dilin Duwa Centre for Indigenous Business Leadership at the University of Melbourne, examined policy design, implementation gaps, business growth, community outcomes and future reforms in public and private procurement.

At the centre of the discussion was a looming test: who should define and verify Indigenous businesses, and how should buyers know whether procurement benefits are genuinely flowing to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people?

From July 1, businesses seeking access to the Commonwealth IPP will need to be at least 51 per cent First Nations owned and controlled, or registered with the Office of the Registrar of Indigenous Corporations. The Commonwealth procurement target increased to 3 per cent from July 1, 2025 and is scheduled to rise to 4 per cent by 2030. The National Indigenous Australians Agency has also confirmed it will release a Request for Tender in the final quarter of 2025-26 to appoint a provider to verify Indigenous businesses under the strengthened framework.

> “Indigenous businesses are employers, innovators, knowledge holders, community anchors

The tender comes amid concern about black-cladding, where a business presents as Indigenous-controlled without genuine Indigenous ownership, control or benefit. Supply Nation currently occupies the dominant national position through Indigenous Business Direct. The National Indigenous Business Chambers Alliance, chaired by Northern Territory Indigenous Business Network chief executive Naomi Anstess, has been advocating for a stronger Indigenous-controlled, chamber-led approach to verification and procurement integrity.

IBR understands NIBCA has developed its own list of Indigenous businesses drawn from participating chamber memberships. It is not a direct equivalent to Supply Nation’s national register, but it reflects a growing push for Indigenous chambers to play a more formal role in verification, local intelligence and community accountability.

Opening the summit, Professor Michelle Evans said Indigenous businesses must be understood as more than recipients of government purchasing decisions. “They are

not just simple beneficiaries of procurement policies," Evans said. "Indigenous businesses are employers, innovators, knowledge holders, community anchors, and an important part that informs and strengthens Indigenous rights to economic self-determination."

She said their impact was measured not only in contracts or revenue but in "the jobs that are created, young people mentored, communities strengthened, and confidence built".

National Indigenous Australians Agency business and economic policy branch manager Shane Dexter says the IPP is not a failed policy requiring wholesale replacement.

"The IPP is a bit different in that there's a lot of success over the last 10 years," Dexter says. "There's improvement that's needed, but we must make sure we don't break what has driven that success."

Dexter says the shift from 50 per cent Indigenous ownership to 51 per cent ownership and control was more than a technical adjustment.

"Fifty-one per cent is meaningful and introducing control to that definition is also meaningful," he says. "It's designed to ensure that Indigenous people are genuinely in control of their businesses and making decisions about where the benefits of those businesses flow."

But he says stronger assurance could impose extra burdens on the businesses the policy was designed to support.

"There is a tension between a thirst for more data and more research and more evidence," he says, warning that impact measurement could create "an administrative or red tape" burden.

"Why are you asking me to do that just because I'm an Indigenous business?" he says.

That concern was sharpened by research presented by Associate Professor Cain Polidano, a principal research fellow at the Melbourne Institute of Applied Economic and Social Research.

The data showed the IPP had opened Commonwealth procurement to many firms for the first time. By 2022, 2179 of 2643 businesses analysed, or 82 per cent, had received their first Commonwealth contract under the IPP. The research also suggested the policy helped businesses learn how to navigate procurement systems, with growth in competitive Commonwealth contracts outside the IPP after 2015.

From left: Associate Professor Cain Polidano; MP Sheena Watt; Supply Nation chief executive Kate Russell; National Indigenous Business Chambers Alliance chair Naomi Anstess
PICTURES: JORGE DE ARAUJO

But the same data complicated the assumption that procurement spend automatically translates into direct Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employment.

Businesses that won no IPP contracts still employed an estimated 44 per cent of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workers in the Indigenous business and corporation ecosystem. At the other end of the spectrum, the top 5 per cent of Indigenous firms, 107 businesses, won 86 per cent of IPP spend and 45 per cent of IPP contracts, but employed just 2 per cent of the ecosystem's Indigenous workforce.

The finding does not mean the IPP has failed or that high-performing firms are not legitimate Indigenous businesses. Some operate in capital-intensive or specialist sectors where direct employment is not the only measure of impact. But the data shows procurement spend, Indigenous ownership and Aboriginal employment outcomes do not always move together. If procurement policy is intended to support broader participation, the next phase will need more nuanced ways of measuring value.

For Supply Nation chief executive Kate Russell, the IPP should be understood as an important mechanism, but not as a complete economic development framework.

"The IPP is a tool. It is a lever," Russell told the summit.

"Its intent, from what I understand, was to provide equity of opportunity and equity of access."

She said policymakers often assumed that once businesses entered procurement systems, they would automatically grow, build capability and become more sustainable. But capability meant different things to different businesses.

"For some Indigenous businesses, some are mums and dads and they just want to put food on the table," she said. "Others want to put their kids through private school or go on big holidays. Some have aspirations to work internationally."

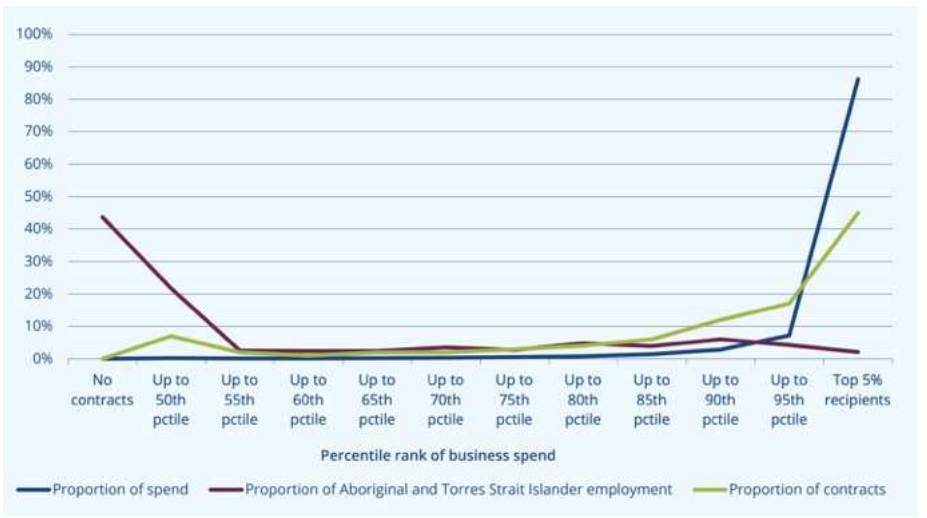
Russell said the sector needed to be clearer about whether the IPP was being treated as social policy or economic policy.

"Is the IPP perfect? No. Does it need reform? Yes. But do we also need to talk about the broader economic and fiscal architecture of this country? Yes," she said.

In a recent interview, Russell said Supply Nation audits "ownership, management and control", but procurers still needed to conduct their own due diligence.

"If we don't protect the credibility of Indigenous business, we undermine everyone," she said.

Supply Nation reported that Indigenous businesses verified through its systems recorded $5.83 billion in procurement spend in 2024-25, up



more than $1 billion from the previous year.

Speaking to the Indigenous Business Review, Anstess says the policy's success should now drive a more sophisticated approach to community impact.

"Blak business is good for the economy," Anstess says. "The Indigenous Procurement Policy remains one of the most successful economic policies ever delivered for Aboriginal enterprise, but it is now time to mature the system beyond contract counts and start measuring real community impact.

"We must stop tolerating black-cladding and token participation, and build sophisticated procurement models that recognise genuine Aboriginal ownership, employment, reinvestment and leadership."

Anstess says NTIBN's research and engagement with Aboriginal businesses across the Territory showed that when Blak business grows, communities benefit through jobs, training, social participation and stronger local economies.

"Policymakers must listen directly to Indigenous business chambers and the businesses doing the work on the ground," she says. "Aboriginal business is not a social program; it is an economic driver."

For major corporate buyers, the summit made clear that Indigenous procurement cannot sit at the edge of a business.

BHP global head of governance and social value procurement Jessica Simpson said the commercial function had placed its overall procurement systems, governance and social value together because social value was a key pillar of BHP's strategy.

"For me, intentional procurement, not transactional procurement," Simpson said. "It has to be the whole business. Having the entire workforce culturally competent and aligned helps enable your procurement policy tenfold."

Simpson said large companies needed to provide clearer pipelines and longer contracts so Indigenous businesses could plan, invest and grow.

"Visibility and transparency will help businesses innovate," she said. "I often hear from businesses, 'when planning is late, we can't ramp up. We can't invest in people or plant or capital'."

Victorian MP Sheena Watt brought the discussion back to political power, visibility and government accountability. She recalled working in corporate Australia in 2002 and being told she was the only Aboriginal person in the building.

"Now I see rooms full of mob with thriving businesses," she said. "You cannot be what you cannot see."

Watt said her vision was for "growing, thriving Aboriginal businesses" and for the Aboriginal economy to receive "the respect and dignity that it absolutely deserves".

The first decade of the IPP was largely about access.

It opened government supply chains, helped Indigenous businesses enter new markets and pushed governments and corporations to take Indigenous enterprise seriously.

The next decade will be about the quality of that access: who controls the business, who benefits from the contract, who verifies authenticity, who carries the reporting burden, and whether procurement spend is building broadbased Indigenous economic power or concentrating opportunity among a smaller group of firms.

Verification is not just paperwork. Measurement is not just data. Procurement is not just spend.

The harder task now is to build a system that protects integrity without smothering businesses in red tape; that combines national scale with community accountability; and that measures success not only by the value of contracts awarded, but by the strength, autonomy and future of the Indigenous business sector itself. ●

The Indigenous Business Review

Q&A | LOCO FOR COCOA FOUNDER TEENA OUDY

Chocolatier finds the sweet spot

Changing a long-held perception of native ingredients has opened up new possibilities, **Dianne Bortoletto** reports

The business name is wonderful. Where did it come from?
I have five adult children and we have a family group chat. It was my son who came up with the name. I wanted something out there and different, so Loco for Cocoa was born.

Where is your Country and who is your mob?
I have Kamileroi ancestry through my great-grandmothers and grandmother, but I was born on the land of the Wiradjuri people in Wagga Wagga, NSW.

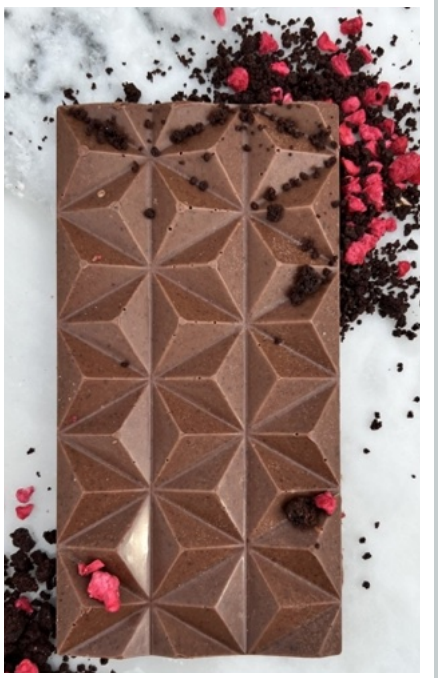
You started Loco for Cocoa five years ago. What prompted that?
I lost my job towards the end of Covid as a pastry chef and chocolatier. It took nearly two years, but I obtained all my council permits and registrations and found myself a kitchen.

Can you give us some background on how you got into this industry?
As a mother of five, my husband and I always had our own business in clothing. At 45, I decided I would go back to school and study to be a pastry chef. I grew up cooking sweets with my grandmother, who taught me everything I know. I also worked within small business and learned a great deal at Hey Tiger and Koko Black. I never thought I would become a chocolatier. I thought I would make pastries and cakes, but one of my first jobs was in chocolate-making and I absolutely loved it and kept going.

Your original chocolate range does not appear to include native flavours. When did that change?
I launched my native range about two years ago, after studying native ingredients until I understood the flavours and profiles. It took me a long time to incorporate those flavours into chocolate, but once I had established the profiles, I have not looked back. I now use native ingredients in my sweet dishes when catering for clients as well as in everyday use.

What inspired you to use native ingredients?
Our native ingredients are abundant but underrepresented in sweet creations. They appear far more often in savoury dishes, so I really wanted to showcase them in sweets. That is how the Loco for Cocoa native range was born.

Where do you source your native ingredients?
We source the native ingredients from Indigenous growers throughout Australia, mainly in South Australia and Tasmania.



Teena Oudry of Loco for Cocoa; the entrepreneur has plans for her products to be saerved on a major airline

What is couverture chocolate and why do you use it?
Couverture chocolate is made with cacao solids and cocoa butter. It has a beautiful mouthfeel and a crisp snap, and it is not full of sugars and seed oils.

As an Indigenous woman in business, what is most important to you in how you run Loco for Cocoa?
For me it is about training the next generation of Indigenous youth. I want them to know there is a bright future for them and I want them to be able to thrive. I am currently working with a Victorian organisation on a program to train more young people.

Is it just you running the business?
Currently it is myself and my husband. We are training staff as the business is growing rapidly and we need the support.

Where can people buy Loco for Cocoa?
You can purchase Loco for Cocoa online through my website. I am also stocked in gourmet stores, boutique stores, and now TK Maxx Australia.

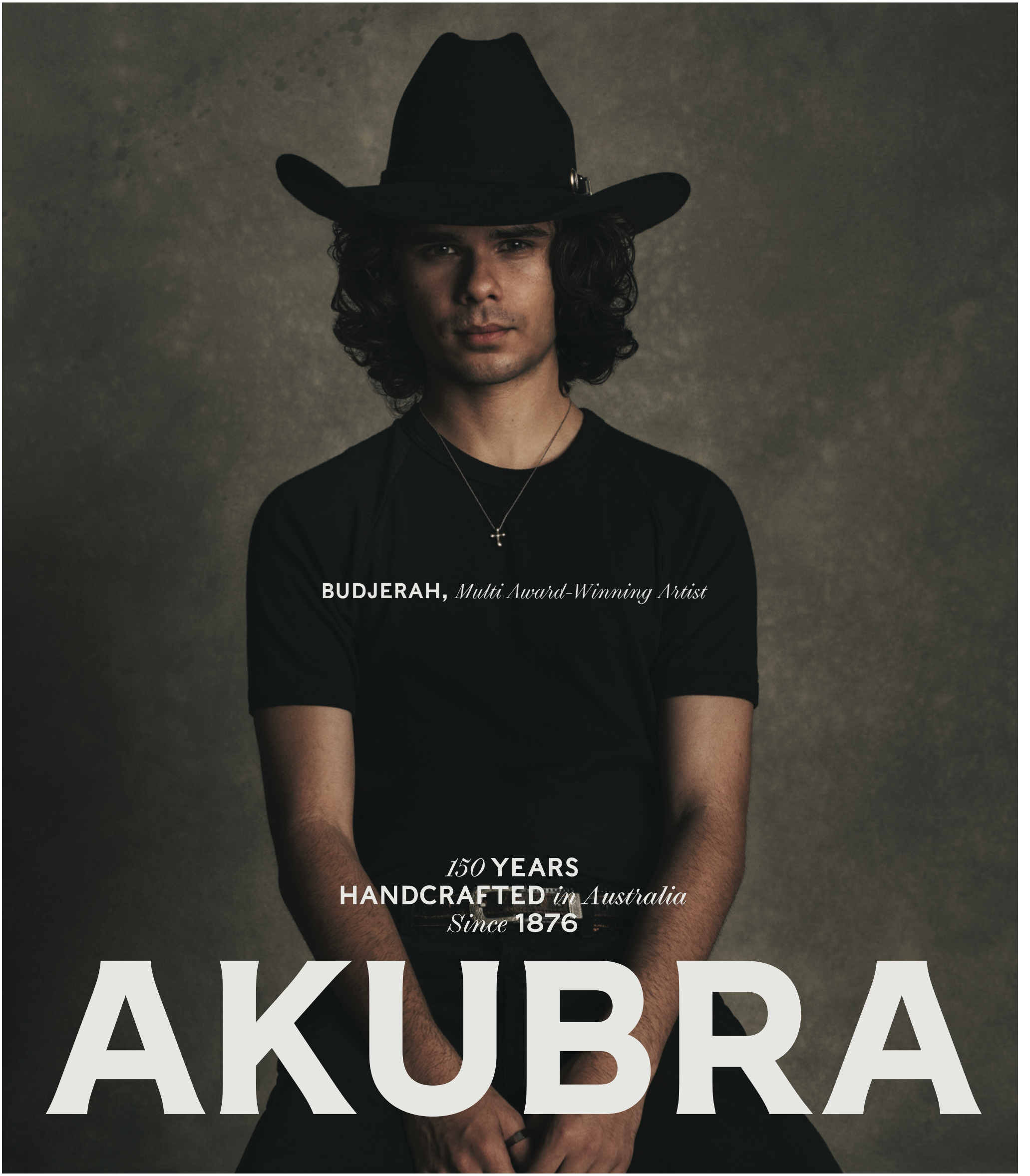
Do you supply businesses as well?
Yes, I currently supply hotels and government and corporate clients with custom designed chocolates.

What are you most proud of?
I am particularly proud that I started this business with a four-week redundancy payout. I am self-made, with no bank loans or financial support, and that is what drives me to keep going.

Have you entered any awards or competitions?
I do not enter competitions. I simply love what I do. Watching a customer try my creations and seeing their expression is enough for me.

What gets you out of bed every day?
I am very lucky to say I love what I do. Making chocolate makes my heart sing. I am also very passionate about native flavours and I am experimenting with new flavours and expanding my range.

What is the big dream for Loco for Cocoa?
I have a major plan in the works to have Loco for Cocoa on a major airline.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