The Indigenous Business Review

ISSUE 5 | APRIL 2025

CAPITAL GAP

Fighting for finance in First Nations enterprises

FROM BUSH TO BOARDROOM

Indigenous exports go global

MOB WHO SERVED

The CommBank program giving Indigenous veterans a new mission

Real partnerships & real impact

Leading from the front at MinRes

Australian Government
Australian Trade and Investment Commission

63rd Australian Export Awards

2025 Australian Export Awards
Applications open 29 April

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The Australian Export Awards have introduced a ‘First Nations Exporter’ category to celebrate international success by First Nations businesses. If your business has been exporting for three years or more, this is your opportunity to build connections and increase global recognition.

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Applications open on 29th April and close on 13th June, 2025.

exportawards.gov.au

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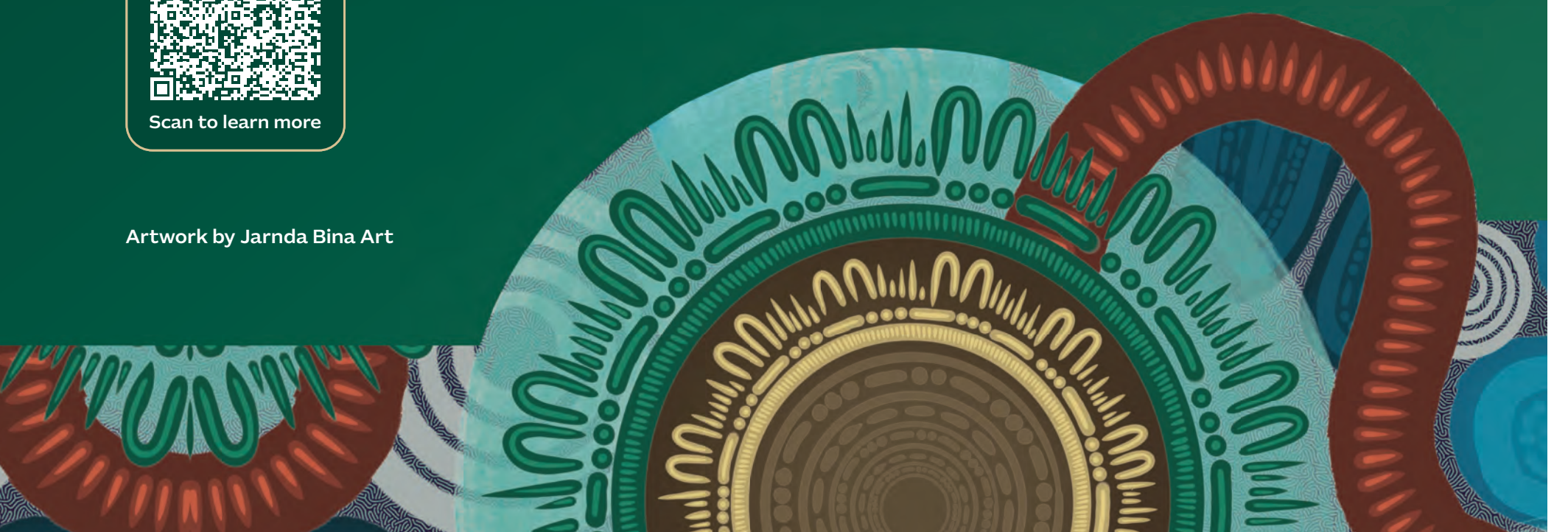

CONTENTS

Exclusive analysis
NATIONAL INDIGENOUS EMPLOYMENT ALLIANCE 4

Feature
ACCESS TO CAPITAL 7

Opinion
JOCELYN KING. 10
SENATOR JANA STEWART 11

Cover story
ONSLOW IRON ORE'S DEEP IMPACT 15

Feature
GREAT CORPORATE ALLIES 20

Spotlight on Indigenous Chambers
GOLDFIELDS ABORIGINAL BUSINESS CHAMBER 22

Feature
EXPORT SUCCESS 27

Profile
YAALI'S CLEVELAND MCGHIE 30

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The Indigenous Business Review

When my grandfather was alive, it was illegal for much of his life for him to own a business. That's not an exaggeration – it was the reality for Indigenous people in this country. Government policies dictated where we could live, work and even if we could open a bank account. Financial independence wasn't just out of reach – it was denied.

That history still casts a long shadow. Today, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander businesses are growing at a remarkable pace. But the same old challenge remains: access to capital. Securing finance, attracting investment and building the foundations to scale up is still a fight for too many Indigenous entrepreneurs.

This edition of The Indigenous Business Review puts that issue where it belongs – front and centre. We look at the structural barriers that hold businesses back and the pathways that are beginning to emerge. Jocelyn King delivers a powerful essay on financial inclusion and the entrenched systems that continue to lock Mob out.

What we need is strong showing from Indigenous Business Australia. IBA was established to be the bridge, but instead many consider it a bottleneck. There is a perception that it's slow, overly cautious, and more focused on compliance than outcomes. If we want Indigenous businesses to grow, the finance designed to support them needs to move at the speed of business – not government.

But there are bright spots. We highlight the leadership of companies like Mineral Resources, BHP, Fortescue and Squadron Energy, who are backing Indigenous suppliers and building long-term commercial partnerships. We recognise the role of financial institutions, particularly the Commonwealth Bank, which is stepping up with initiatives like CommBank for Veterans and dedicated support for Indigenous entrepreneurs. That kind of leadership matters – especially from major banks – and it deserves acknowledgment.

We also feature Ikuntji Artists, who are making waves globally, and we take stock of the emerging bushfoods industry and what it tells us about blending cultural knowledge with commercial potential.

The truth is, the ambition and capability have always been there. What's been missing is the capital. It's time to change that – and this edition is our contribution to that conversation.

Zak Kirkup
Managing Editor

The Indigenous Business Review

EXCLUSIVE REPORT | NATIONAL INDIGENOUS EMPLOYMENT AND TRAINING ALLIANCE

Workplace snapshot a window to best practice

Are organisations ready to move beyond the status quo and create environments that genuinely support First Nations talent? Achieving equity demands more than good intentions – it requires the active engagement of the 97 per cent of non-Indigenous Australians, and, critically, their employers. Landmark research across 34 of Australia's leading companies is now offering a blueprint for meaningful change – one that brings us closer to true parity. David Prestipino has this exclusive analysis

The reality of life for Indigenous employees at some of Australia's largest workplaces has been detailed in a new analysis by the National Indigenous Employment and Training Alliance, a First Nations-led body working to close employment gaps and promote sustainable economic outcomes.

To support this work, The Alliance released The First Nations Employment Index 2025, a forensic benchmarking tool analysing 34 employers and their best practices. The data represents 8 per cent of the national workforce, including 29,935 First Nations employees. Contributions came from 143 interviews and yarning circles.

The research, undertaken with Murawin and the Social Research Centre, with support from Minderoo Foundation, amplifies the lived experiences of Indigenous employees while advancing First Nations data sovereignty and governance. It offers a "clear roadmap" for organisations to improve employment and training outcomes.

Key findings include challenges around procurement, retention, cultural competency, career pathways and racism. The Indigenous Business Review spoke with companies involved in the research with the aim of encouraging more organisations to lift their efforts.

Belinda Nye, First Nations engagement manager at Programmed, says the company's national footprint of more than 100 locations and 30,000 staff is supported by a strong First Nations strategy.

"Developing career pathways and recognising Indigenous culture are front of mind," she says. "We regularly attend expos and community events to promote our opportunities and build partnerships."

Programmed works with local schools and academies to support traineeships and apprenticeships, and its clients are increasingly focused on Indigenous recruitment. The Programmed staffing initiative provides localised support and leadership pathways for First Nations staff.

"The program allows us to mentor, grow cultural connections and support our branches and employees in First Nations culture and safety," Nye says.

External challenges reflect those in Index 2025. "Attracting First Nations talent is difficult due to a limited talent pool, high demand for skilled workers,

More than a third

(38%) of organisations, had First Nations employment KPIs for executive leaders.

28%

Only a quarter (28%) had First Nations KPIs for senior leaders.

21%

Even fewer had First Nations KPIs for mid-level managers (21%).

“We’re in a privileged position to bridge skills gaps

and cultural and geographical ties,” she says. “But we’re in a privileged position to bridge skills gaps through multiple career pathways.”

Programmed’s wide geographic reach enables employees to work near family or ancestral lands. In some cases, Programmed has guided clients on better-aligned recruitment strategies to avoid tokenism.

First Nations employment is embedded across the entire business, not just its specialist team. “We run in-depth training on recruitment, cultural awareness and unconscious bias, and we encourage community involvement to build trust,” Nye says.

With most staff working on client sites, Programmed assumes responsibility for promoting culturally safe environments.

“We look at cultural protocols, wellness programs and available support networks, from both us and the client,” Nye says.

The company also runs cultural safety audits to support client reconciliation efforts. “Many organisations struggle to make their [reconciliation action plan] actions meaningful,” Nye says. “We don’t want to box tick; we want our actions to create measurable impact.”

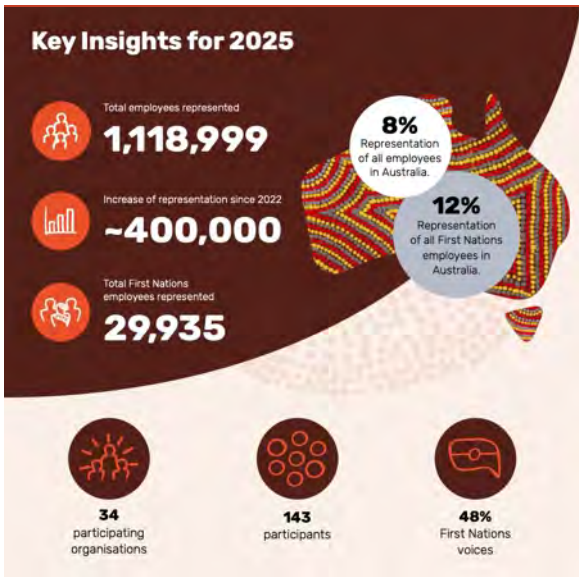
Finding culturally respectful and accurate content for training remains challenging. “Some content can be uncomfortable, but we’re committed to truth-telling. Our employees’ wellbeing is always considered, but stories and perspectives must be heard,” Nye says.

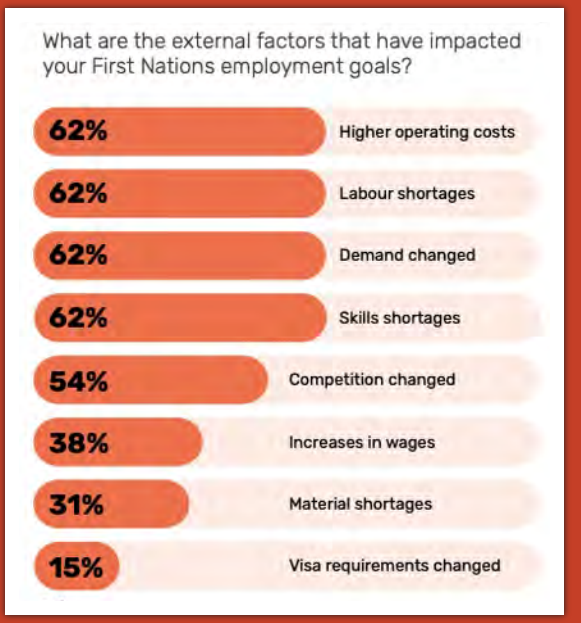
While roles designated for First Nations candidates increase workforce participation, some employees report feeling stigmatised.

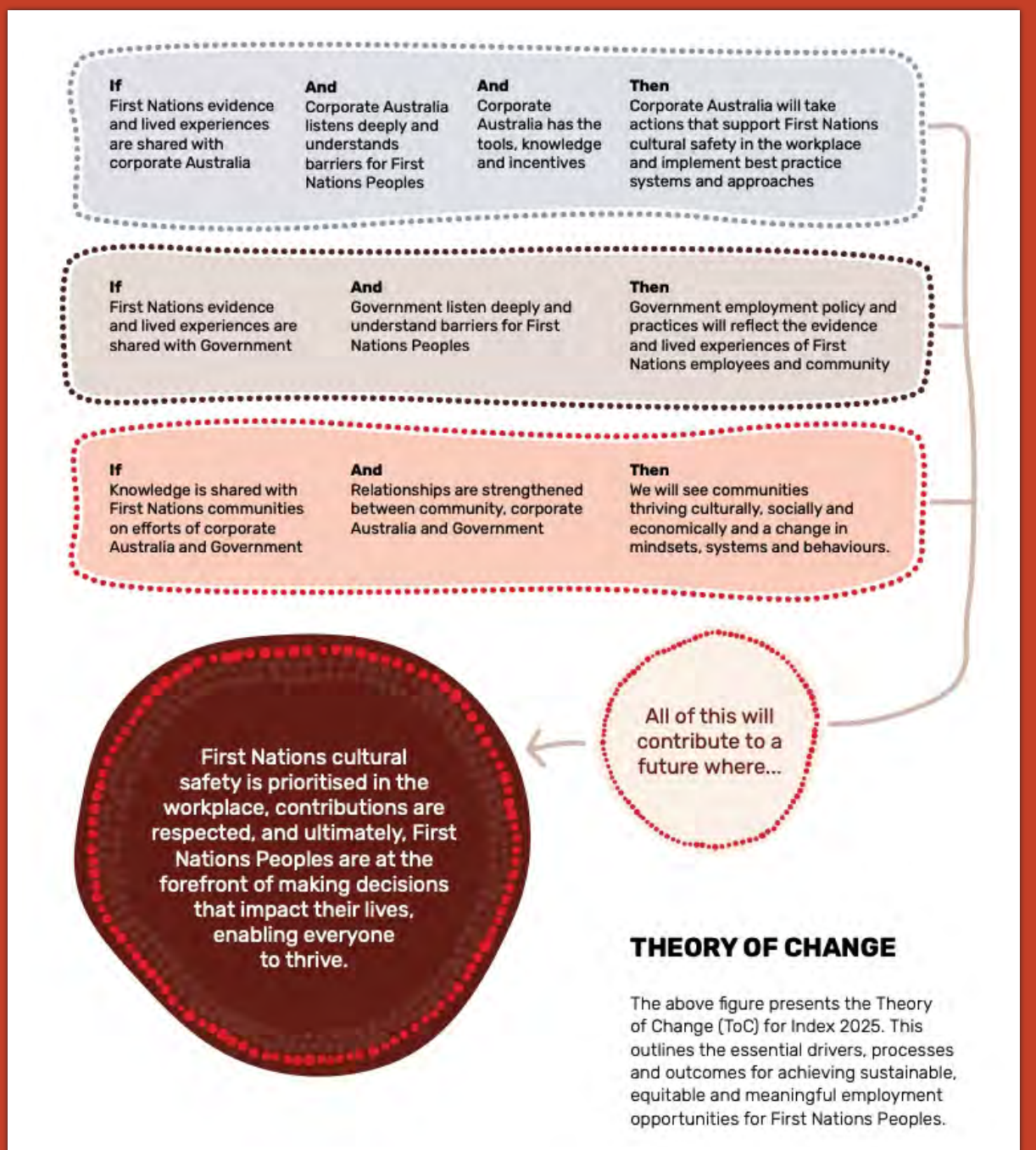
“It was very much a box-ticking activity. I didn’t realise that at the time, but yeah, very much so,” one First Nations employee says. An executive from one of the 34 companies agrees: “We had an agreement to place 5000 First Nations employees, but it became a box-icking exercise.”

Another employee says: “My skill set isn’t utilised to its full potential, but I stay due to my responsibility to mob and community.”

Alliance CEO Kylie Penehoe, a







THEORY OF CHANGE

The above figure presents the Theory of Change (ToC) for Index 2025. This outlines the essential drivers, processes and outcomes for achieving sustainable, equitable and meaningful employment opportunities for First Nations Peoples.

proud Wonnarua and Wiradjuri woman, says the Index puts data back into Indigenous hands to shape their own narratives. "Employment parity is about voice, career security and real progression," she says.

While 38 per cent of businesses had adopted best practices in attraction and recruitment, only 3 per cent were advocating for systemic change.

"Foundations are being laid, but advocacy and long-term impact remain challenges," Penehoe says.

Retention and career development were also weak points: only 12 per cent of businesses were actively supporting leadership pathways for First Nations employees. Workplace culture and inclusion were essential to retention, yet just 3 per cent were leading in this space.

"Building truly inclusive workplaces requires more than good intentions. It takes action, accountability and leadership," Penehoe says.

"Managers can drive change but they need the right support. Investing in their capability and time is key."

Leading recruitment firm Hays says its participation in the Index aligns with its commitment to reconciliation and building sustainable partnerships.

"This experience gave us a deeper understanding of our focus areas," Hays says. "The findings came at a critical time as we reshape our strategies for Indigenous recruitment, retention and development. These insights will lead to more meaningful employment outcomes."

Kimberley Land Council CEO Tyronne Garstone, whose organisation has secured Native Title over 98 per cent of the North West, says Indigenous-led solutions must be properly resourced.

"We don't need permission to make progress. We already have the solutions. What we need are the resources to implement them," Garstone says.

He wants governments to move beyond rhetoric and to fund Indigenous participation in economic development.

"We also need real partnerships and modernised legislation to support, not block, self-determined development," he says.

So, where to from here?

The evidence in Index 2025 shows that transforming policy into measurable, accountable practices is critical to success.

"We are the world's oldest continuing culture, yet systemic barriers continue to limit our agency," Penehoe says. "Despite efforts since 2008, progress is slow. Without a data-driven approach with measurable targets, the employment gap will persist."

The 34 participating organisations represent 12 per cent of the Indigenous workforce and demonstrated commitment to best practice.

"Their participation reflects the courage needed to pursue truth-telling and progress," Penehoe says.

"It's now essential for employers to use their influence to dismantle systemic barriers and create inclusive, thriving workplaces."

Angels, accelerators, banks key to dream of a First Nations ASX listing

In 2024, Indigenous businesses contributed an estimated $4.9 billion to the Australian economy

Funding by government grant gives Indigenous ventures the assumed status of social programs. Only private capital can shake off that perception, reports Alex Sanderson

For most Indigenous entrepreneurs, the road to creating and scaling businesses remains a challenge of overcoming long-standing barriers, the greatest being access to capital. Across Australia, Indigenous businesses rely primarily on two forms of funding: government grants, and loans through Indigenous Business Australia. While these support mechanisms are essential, they also create a cycle of dependency on government, restricting Indigenous businesses from tapping into the broader financial options readily available to non-Indigenous businesses, limiting their ability to build financial independence and achieve true economic self-determination.

The State of Indigenous Business Report 2024 by Supply Nation further outlines the depth of this issue. The report reveals that Indigenous business owners face significant difficulties securing other types of funding, such as bank loans, private investment and commercial finance. These challenges are deeply rooted in systemic inequality. Indigenous Australians continue to experience much lower rates of personal savings, home ownership, and inherited wealth less than half that of non-Indigenous Australians, making it harder to offer collateral when seeking investment.

This wealth gap stems from a long history of policies and laws that denied Indigenous people the opportunity to build and pass on financial security.

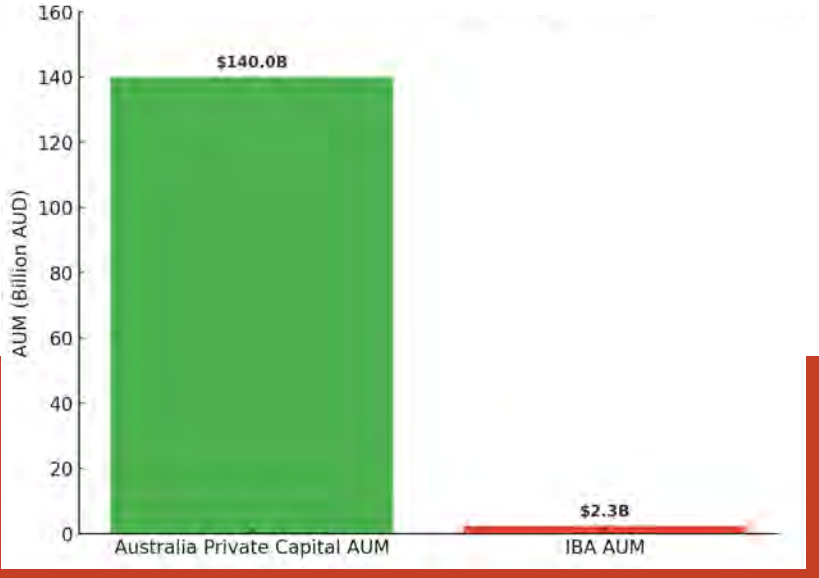
What makes this funding gap even more striking is the size and success of the Indigenous business sector itself. In 2024, Indigenous businesses contributed an estimated $4.9 billion to the Australian economy. Corporate and government organisations also spent a record $4.6 billion purchasing goods and services from Indigenous-owned businesses, an increase of $500 million from the previous year. Yet despite this growth, access to private sector funding, such as venture capital, equity investment or mainstream business loans remains out of reach for many Indigenous entrepreneurs. Without these options, opportunities to scale and innovate and to build long-term sustainability are often limited.

Growth in spend over the past three years

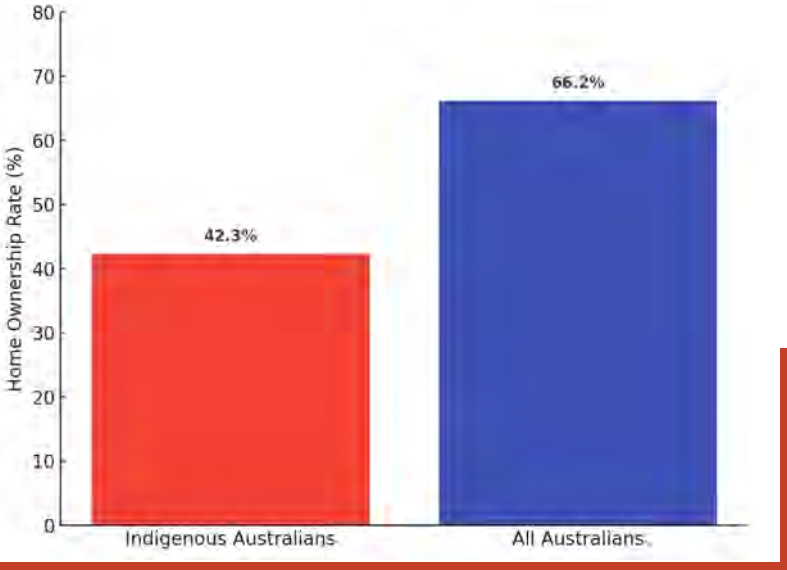
Members' spend by organisation type in FY23-24

Spend by members with a RAP in FY23-24

Assets under management (AUM) comparison ($AU billion)



Home ownership rates in Australia



Even with a thriving sector and a strong and committed customer base, Indigenous entrepreneurs are still largely invisible in Australia's investment landscape. According to the Australian Investment Council's 2024 annual report, Australia's private capital industry has seen significant growth. Assets under management reached $140 billion, up 33 per cent from 18 months prior. In contrast, IBA assets under management are just over $2.3 billion, growing on average 7.1 per cent per year.

This stark difference highlights a broader issue: there is a continued overreliance on government grants and loans that positions Indigenous businesses as social programs, rather than viable commercial ventures. To foster real economic empowerment, there needs to be a shift in perception by the investment ecosystem, one that recognises Indigenous businesses as investable and scalable enterprises capable of driving growth and innovation.

To genuinely foster economic empowerment, the investment ecosystem must rethink how it engages with, and invests in, Indigenous businesses. Australia has 34 active angel networks, managing portfolios of more than 350 companies and $600 million in funding, a clear opportunity to bridge the investment gap. These networks can embed Indigenous business frameworks into their programs; they can offer tailored mentorship; ensure Indigenous representation; and create clear pathways for Indigenous entrepreneurs to access early-stage capital.

Similarly, Australia's 234 accelerator and incubator programs, supporting more than 2400 companies, must play a role. It is not enough to have just one Indigenous-focused angel syndicate and accelerator. Every syndicate and accelerator has unique capabilities and resources to offer, and all must contribute to advancing Indigenous entrepreneurship and self-determination. Investment firms at all stages of the business lifecycle must also commit to including Indigenous businesses within their portfolios, continuously adapting their investment criteria to reflect the unique structures of Indigenous businesses.

And finally, banks have a key role to play, developing flexible lending models that move beyond traditional collateral requirements and providing Indigenous banking teams who understand the specific needs of Indigenous entrepreneurs and businesses. Westpac and the CBA have taken early steps in this direction.

These steps are key to changing how investors view Indigenous entrepreneurs, shifting perception and turning Indigenous businesses from invisible to investable, no longer seen as social programs, but as scalable, high-growth enterprises driving innovation and economic growth. Once implemented, these efforts could pave the way for a milestone moment, the listing of Australia's first Indigenous-owned business on the ASX; an achievement that would signal true progress towards Indigenous economic empowerment and self-determination. ●

■ *Alex Sanderson is a business contributor to the Indigenous Business Review. He is founder and a former president of UNSW First Nations Business Society, an Indigenous business coach and a Yarpa adviser, and an executive education facilitator (Indigenous Programs) at the Australian Graduate School of Management.*

Traditional lender rigidity is a hurdle that can be overcome

ZAK KIRKUP

For many Indigenous business owners, growth often hinges on access to capital. Whether seeking opportunities for acquisition, expansion or sale, securing the necessary financial backing remains one of the biggest hurdles.

Damien Newnham, a partner of more than 15 years at GMO Business Brokers, has extensive experience helping Indigenous entrepreneurs navigate these challenges and unlock new business opportunities.

He says that while many Indigenous businesses have strong operations, getting access to funding for expansion or acquisitions can be significantly more difficult compared to their non-Indigenous counterparts.

"Many Indigenous business owners are highly skilled operators, running profitable enterprises, but the challenge is scaling up."

This difficulty is exacerbated by factors such as limited generational wealth, a lack of collateral, and complex ownership structures within Indigenous businesses, particularly those tied to community trusts or joint ventures.

Despite these challenges, Newnham says there are multiple pathways for Indigenous business owners to achieve their growth ambitions. One key strategy is leveraging business sales and acquisitions as a means of scaling up.

"We work closely with Indigenous businesses looking to expand through acquisition, whether that's buying a complementary business to increase market share or entering new industries," he says.

"At the same time, we help Indigenous owners who are looking to exit find the right buyers."

He says private investors, joint ventures and vendor finance agreements are playing an increasingly crucial role in bridging the capital gap. These structures allow Indigenous business owners to acquire businesses without relying solely on traditional bank loans.

Newnham says government grants and funding programs, such as Indigenous Business Australia finance options, have supported Indigenous businesses but he says these programs must be more accessible and tailored to real-world business growth.

"The private sector also has a role to play. More corporates should be looking at direct investment, partnerships and acquisition funding to support Indigenous business growth, rather than just focusing on procurement policies," he says.

Damien Newnham of GMO and Indigenous Adviser Tony Shaw

For Indigenous business owners, the key takeaway is that while access to capital remains a challenge, alternative pathways exist.

"With the right strategic approach, whether through acquisitions, private funding or structured finance deals, Indigenous businesses can secure their financial future, drive self-determination and create lasting economic opportunities for their communities," Newnham says.

As part of engaging with Indigenous sellers or buyers, GMO works alongside Tony Shaw, a Wongutha man from the northeastern goldfields of WA to provide advice and advisory services.

"Access to capital is important, but having control over financial decisions, strategy, and long-term growth is what truly empowers our people. It's not just about profit-it's about ensuring that Indigenous enterprises have the independence and capability to shape their own futures on their own terms." says Shaw. ●

> "The key takeaway is that while access to capital remains a challenge, alternative pathways exist

An unfair financial system needs to unlearn its biases

Banks, set in their Western ways, are a barrier to Indigenous entrepreneurs seeking the capital to turn ideas into reality

Jocelyn King is a Bundjalung woman and Chair of First Australians Capital

OPINION | JOCELYN KING

The first deposit our ancestors made wasn't into a bank, it was into Country, a system of law, reciprocity and careful custodianship that sustained the world's oldest continuing culture. That original deposit is still paying dividends for this nation, yet the colonial, financial and legal systems that followed have extracted wealth and returned very little in the way of equity or opportunity.

Our land, the foundation of our economic and cultural sovereignty, was taken under the lie of terra nullius. That theft wasn't just moral or cultural; it was economic. Land is capital. It is leverage, it is security. And when land is stolen, so, too, is the capacity to build and sustain wealth.

Today, the banks tell First Nations businesses that they are "not credit-ready", "the risk is too high," or "you don't meet the criteria". On closer examination, a deeper truth emerges: the system was never designed for us, and it has never been made accountable for the ways it has profited from our dispossession. In lending, banks use the 'Six Cs of Credit' to assess eligibility, namely character, capacity, capital, collateral, conditions and credit history.

While they appear objective, in practice, they reflect and reinforce the deep structural exclusions we've faced for generations.

Each of these "Cs" is a checkpoint designed without consideration for Indigenous people. They create barriers that block even the most visionary Indigenous entrepreneurs from accessing the capital they need to grow.

The rules of finance must be rewritten.

Access to capital is more than money. It enables control, opportunity and self-determination. If Australia is serious about economic justice for First Nations peoples, it must go beyond acknowledgments and advisory panels and it must restructure how capital flows and its beneficiaries.

This means investing in Indigenous-led capital funds that reflect our values and priorities; reforming credit assessment tools to account for collective ownership, cultural assets and non-Western economic models; embedding repair and redress into the DNA of financial institutions; establishing accountability mechanisms to track how much capital is actually reaching Indigenous businesses and at what terms; and partnering with community-controlled intermediaries to design solutions with us, not for us.

> "When land is stolen, so is the capacity to build and sustain wealth

We don't need to be taught how to participate in the economy. We've always had economies — sustainable, place-based and relational. What we need is for the financial system to unlearn its own biases and rebuild on a foundation that includes us not as exceptions, but as equals.

We've been investing in this continent for over 60,000 years. It's time the system started investing back.

Senator Jana Stewart says 770 First Nations women have started work in the Indigenous Ranger Program

Indigenous business has flourished under the Albanese Labor government, contributing to the economy, creating jobs and fostering optimism

Support for enterprise is at risk

OPINION | SENATOR JANA STEWART

First Nations people and businesses are driving Australia's economic growth, annually contributing $16.1 billion in revenue, paying out $4.2 million in wages and employing more than 116,000 people. Our economy is expanding rapidly via businesses that are thriving in construction, renewable energy, native food, fashion, IT and tourism.

First Nations enterprises generate significant social and economic value, creating $4.41 for every dollar spent, and they are up to 100 times more likely to employ First Nations Australians. We're also excelling internationally: First Nations exporters generated more than $670 million in 2022-23.

With the right support, this success can continue. But as we approach the 2025 federal election, all of this is at risk. Since 2022, the Albanese Labor government has invested in strengthening families and communities, focusing on sustainable opportunities that empower First Nations Australians.

We're building a Future Made in Australia, unlocking investment and ensuring First Nations businesses benefit from the clean energy transition. More than one million jobs have been created under Labor, more than any government in a single term. Our remote jobs program is creating 3,000 jobs in communities neglected under a decade of Coalition rule.

The First Nations Health Worker Traineeship Program now has 300 enrolments, and we've expanded the Indigenous Ranger Program, creating 1000 new jobs, including 770 for First Nations women. We're strengthening the Indigenous Procurement Policy, expanding Indigenous Business Australia's leverage capacity, and investing in business coaching for First Nations women. More than 34,000 First Nations people have accessed free TAFE courses and new scholarships are helping First Nations students enter psychology and healthcare.

Meanwhile, Peter Dutton and the Liberal-National Coalition push a narrative of dysfunction, undermining our achievements and harming our young people's sense of identity. They've already flagged cuts to government spending. Our communities know who will bear the brunt. Scrapping funding for ceremonies like Welcome to Country is just the start. What else will they cut? How will this affect our businesses?

We've seen what happens when conservatives take power. In New Zealand, the conservative National government has abolished the Māori Health Authority, reversed language and culture funding and dropped Indigenous cancer targets, while its economy declines.

At this election, we have a choice: a government that supports First Nations success or one that undermines it. Only an Albanese Labor government will deliver the investment and opportunity our communities deserve.

■ *Senator Jana Stewart (Mutthi Mutthi and Wamba Wamba), Labor Senator for Victoria*

The Indigenous Business Review

Showing the way in First Nations engagement

Squadron Energy, a leader in the push towards renewables, is delivering economic and social benefits through procurement and jobs policies. Zak kirkup reports

In Australia's fast-growing renewable energy sector, meaningful engagement with First Nations communities is becoming a critical benchmark for ethical development. Few embody this commitment better than Aboriginal man John Allison, First Nations engagement lead at Squadron Energy. With a background in the public sector and a deep understanding of Indigenous affairs, Allison is at the forefront of shaping how major developments engage with Aboriginal communities in a way that is genuine, productive and enduring.

Squadron Energy, one of Australia's leading renewable energy companies, is investing heavily in wind, solar and battery storage projects across the country.

With a clear mission to drive Australia's clean energy transition, Squadron is also demonstrating how major corporations can lead in Indigenous engagement, not just as a regulatory requirement, but as a core principle of its operations.

For Allison, the challenge and opportunity lie in ensuring that First Nations voices are not only heard but embedded in decision-making.

"From day one, I haven't had any constraints in how we engage with First Nations communities," he says. "It's about real representation, real places at the table. The scepticism I had when I started quickly disappeared when I saw the quality of people here who genuinely want to do good."

One of the most pressing issues facing First Nations community engagement within large-scale developments is the concept of consent. As Allison says: "Australia is a signatory to the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, which commits to ensuring First Nations voices are part of decision-making. But because it's not legislated here, the responsibility falls to developers like us to ensure it happens in a real and meaningful way."

Squadron is taking a place-based approach, tailoring engagement to the specific needs and decision-making structures of each community rather than applying a one-size-fits-all model. "Every First Nations community is

Squadron Energy's First Nations Engagement Facilitator, Justin Toomey-White

John Allison at Squadron Energy's Port Kembla Energy Terminal, and below, with University of Wollongong students competing at the Indigenous Nationals

different. The first step is listening and learning, not dictating," Allison says. "That's the difference between ticking a box and actually delivering something that benefits everyone."

Beyond consultation, Squadron is working to increase economic participation through Indigenous procurement and employment. The company is embedding First Nations business Indigenous stretch targets in contracts and ensuring Aboriginal businesses have a pathway to meaningful participation. "We don't just want First Nations businesses to be subcontractors," Allison says. "Our vision is to see First Nations business to become tier-one contractors, leading major projects."

One example of this place-based approach in action is at Squadron's Clarke Creek site in Queensland, where a sensitive cultural heritage issue arose. Rather than pushing ahead, the company paused construction to work through solutions in true co-design with Traditional Owners. "It's the best example in my career of how to properly work with traditional owners," Allison says.

The lesson from Squadron's approach is clear: meaningful engagement with First Nations communities isn't just about avoiding disputes; it's about building stronger, more sustainable projects that benefit everyone involved. As the renewable energy industry grows, companies will be judged not only on their environmental credentials but also on their ability to deliver economic and social benefits to the communities on whose land they operate.

Squadron Energy, with Allison at the helm of its First Nations engagement, is setting a benchmark for how to do this the right way, creating a model for how the corporate sector can and should work with First Nations people in Australia's energy future.

"Our vision is to see First Nations business to become tier-one contractors, leading major projects

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fortescue.com

First ore on ship, transhipper, bulk barrier, Onslow Port

Onslow Iron digs deep for economic, community impact

Mineral Resources has Indigenous-owned businesses embedded in its supply chain, creating wealth and jobs, writes Zak Kirkup

Mineral Resources (MinRes) has long established itself as one of Australia's leading mining and services companies.

Founded in 1993, the company has built a strong reputation for innovation, operational excellence and delivering large-scale projects that contribute to the nation's economic development.

Today, MinRes' mining services and commodities businesses are also driving Indigenous engagement and economic empowerment. Nowhere is this more evident than in the Onslow Iron project, a transformative initiative in Western Australia's Pilbara region that has placed Traditional Owner-led businesses at its core.

MinRes' Onslow Iron project harnesses MinRes-led innovation, including modular crushers, jumbo road trains and shallow-draft transhippers to transport iron ore 150km from Ken's Bore mine site to the Port of Ashburton.

Onslow Iron successfully delivered its first ore on ship in May 2024 and it is now ramping up production to 35 million tonnes per year.

The success of Onslow Iron has been supported by deep partnerships with local Indigenous suppliers. These businesses are not only providing critical services, they are also shaping the project's legacy through job-creation, long-term capability-building and economic empowerment.

By integrating Indigenous-owned enterprises

across its supply chain, MinRes is demonstrating how the resource sector can encourage generational change in Indigenous communities.

MinRes has taken a deliberate and strategic approach to fostering Indigenous business partnerships, ensuring these relationships go beyond symbolic agreements. The company has embedded Indigenous procurement into its broader operational strategy, actively working with Traditional Owner businesses to create sustainable and long-term economic opportunities.

MinRes managing director Chris Ellison has made it clear that empowering Indigenous Australians is a corporate priority.

"We are dedicated to the economic empowerment of Indigenous Australians, offering opportunities for training, employment, procurement and business development support," Ellison says.

"It's important to have Traditional Owners working on the land where they are from, to share their knowledge and capabilities, build employment opportunities within the community and provide business-critical services."

This commitment has led to tangible results. In FY24, MinRes engaged 44 active Indigenous suppliers and had a total Indigenous business spend of $68.4 million, a 185 per cent increase from the previous financial year.

This surge in engagement has provided opportunities for Traditional Owner businesses across a wide range of services, from civil construction to vehicle maintenance and facilities management.

"Our success is only possible with the support of the people and businesses who provide vital services to keep our business running," says Ellison.

"We have positively impacted the local community through direct employment, skill creation and the growth in Indigenous entrepreneurs and business owners.

"In turn, the Indigenous businesses that have supported our projects, such as Onslow Iron, have made a huge impact on our success."

MinRes proudly partners with businesses from Robe River Kuruma and Thalanyji, the Traditional Owners of the lands where Onslow Iron operates, to drive the ongoing success of the project.

Looking to the future

Onslow Iron is just one example of how MinRes is integrating Indigenous businesses into its operations. The success of this model demonstrates the tangible benefits of genuine Indigenous engagement.

As Ellison says: "Working with Indigenous businesses can have a generational impact by building expertise and skills that can be transferred across other industries."

For Onslow Iron and beyond, these partnerships are not just about today's operations. They are also laying the foundation for Indigenous economic empowerment for decades to come. •

> **"The Indigenous businesses that have supported our projects, such as Onslow Iron, have made a huge impact on our success**

Indigenous businesses driving Onslow Iron

Onslow Iron is strengthened by the expertise and services provided by its Indigenous business partners. These businesses, owned and operated by Traditional Owners, are delivering key operational support while ensuring the economic benefits of the project flow back into their communities

Djeleanna

Djeleanna began by supporting the exploration team at the Ken's Bore mine site. It has since transitioned into production mining, owning and operating a fleet of earthmoving equipment. The business has experienced substantial growth, enabling it to acquire a commercial yard in Roebourne that has become a hub for local employment and skills development.

"We feel like MinRes listens to us and feels like an extended family," says managing director Kimberley Slattery. "It's been such a surprise to see how MinRes treats Traditional Owners. They gave their word and they've kept it. They changed our view of what a mining company can do when they back their promises with actions. "Business isn't for everybody. It's challenging but it's rewarding when you get it right."

Muguriyarra

Muguriyarra is an Indigenous earthmoving, road and civil construction contractor based in Onslow. The company was launched as a joint venture between Thalanyji man Jaiden Hayes and NTC Contracting, which has operated in Onslow for more than 70 years.

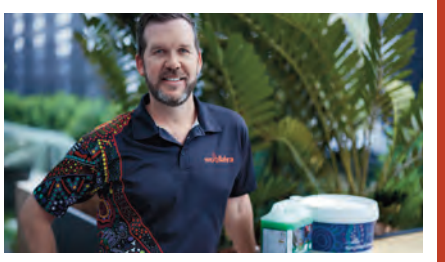
"One of the big reasons I wanted to do this was to try to get people trained up with licences because a lot of people don't ever have the chance to learn," says Hayes.

"I want to give the younger kids that opportunity to get into work and we're working with MinRes to ensure the project delivers long-term benefits to the Traditional Owners for generations to come."

Irdiyamarnu Tyres Services

A wholly Indigenous-owned business, Irdiyamarnu Tyres Services ensures Onslow Iron's haulage trucks remain operational.

Clockwise from left: Karen Hayes at Jundalya; Jaliyarnu Yinta maintains the landscape; Woollahra supplies chemicals and workshop essentials; Muguriyarra does earthmoving, road and civil construction; Ngarliya provides fire suppression services in the Pilbara; Irdiyamarnu Tyres Services; and Djeleanna at Ken's Bore



Director Frances Hayes sees this as a major step towards economic self-determination.

"This partnership provides the support needed to expand our commercial operations and create more employment opportunities and skills development programs for our people," Hayes says.

Jundalya

Jundalya Human Resources was born from a business opportunity provided by MinRes and its significance lies not only in the Native Title Agreement but, more importantly, in the personal commitment of MinRes chief executive Chris Ellison and his leadership team.

"As a Thalanyji woman, my dream has always been to run a recruitment business and thanks to MinRes, that dream has become a reality," says director Karen Hayes.

"Even though MinRes has its own challenges, they have stood by Jundalya."

Ngarliya Contracting

Ngarliya is one of the first majority Indigenous-owned businesses to provide fire suppression services in the Pilbara.

As director Kelly Slattery says, the business is focused on long-term sustainability: "For me, as a Traditional Owner, to be able to provide opportunities for members of the community and to work on Country is a huge advantage."

Robe River Services

By providing essential transport services, Robe River Services is playing a key role in the development of Onslow Iron. The partnership with MinRes has helped the business establish itself in the mining sector, ensuring Traditional Owners have direct involvement in major operations.

Says director Leanne Evans: "Direct engagement with Robe River Services, the economic development vehicle for Robe River Kuruma people, creates a vital platform to integrate cultural preservation with economic growth across all project opportunities.

"The active involvement of Traditional Owners in projects like Onslow Iron is invaluable.

"It fosters a direct connection to community and puts us at the forefront of future opportunities."

Jaliyarnu Yinta

Jaliyarnu Yinta plays a critical role in maintaining the landscape at Onslow Iron, ensuring environmental and cultural considerations are respected.

"Our heritage is important to us," says director Georgina Bobby. "To get to go out on Country where we grew up and learnt about the land from our elders is significant. It's a great sense of pride."

Woollahra

Woollahra, which supplies cleaning chemicals, janitorial supplies, PPE, kitchen consumables, and workshop essentials demonstrates a model of respectful and empowering resource development that also promotes economic growth and environmental stewardship.

"Through our collaboration with MinRes, we have successfully expanded our development initiatives with Traditional Owner businesses," says director Trudy Hayes. "This partnership ensures a significant economic contribution to Indigenous business growth and benefits their communities."

BriJarCass

A 100 per cent Indigenous-owned business, BriJarCass Security Pty Ltd was established in 2010 to provide employment opportunities for Indigenous people with a primary focus on Thalanyji and local Indigenous workers. The business has secured a four-year contract at MinRes' accommodation villages, reinforcing the growing role of Indigenous enterprises in major projects. "We are looking forward to expanding and providing more opportunities for Indigenous workers," says project manager Hayley Hayes. •

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Program helps veterans thrive beyond service years

A volunteer group and CommBank want to ensure Indigenous soldiers are supported, writes **Zak Kirkup**

Indigenous veterans have long been underrepresented in Australia's historical records, their contributions to the nation's defence overlooked. Now, thanks to a partnership between CommBank and volunteer group Our Indigenous Veterans, this is changing. The initiative is ensuring that First Nations service members receive both recognition for their sacrifices and support in their post-service careers.

Our Indigenous Veterans, founded by Zita Vafiopulous, a former Royal Australian Navy transport driver, is dedicated to identifying and acknowledging the service of Indigenous Australians in the military.

With a team of passionate volunteers, the organisation is developing a database to preserve these histories, ensuring they are never forgotten.

A key milestone in this effort was the recent launch of the partnership between Our Indigenous Veterans and CommBank at RSL Lifecare in Wagga Wagga, NSW.

The partnership signifies more than just historical recognition; it is a commitment to ensuring Indigenous veterans have pathways into business and economic success post-service. Transitioning from military life to entrepreneurship presents unique challenges and access to funding, networks and business support remains a barrier for many Indigenous veterans.

Through its Indigenous Business Banking division, CommBank is taking steps to bridge this gap.

The bank has provided sponsorship to develop a website where Indigenous families can document and share the service histories of their loved ones. This initiative not only preserves historical records but also serves as a networking platform, allowing Indigenous veterans to connect with business opportunities and support services.

Vafiopulous emphasises the critical role CommBank has played in bringing this initiative to life.

"CommBank has provided sponsorship for us which has allowed us to build the website that will house all the information for Indigenous families," she says.

"Without this, we would be years away and very busy fundraising. There is only so much you can ask of a small community who already are huge givers to the community groups."

She also highlights the unique approach CommBank has taken.

"We have found working with the Indigenous Unit so rewarding," she says.

"By that I mean the women I have worked with have what I call 'honest souls'. They believe in what they are doing, and it shows in the way they work with us and our own Indigenous Aunties and Uncles. They are very genuine women and I could not ask for better partners for this project."

It's clear, too, that this is a true partnership.

"As the first dedicated banking program in Australia supporting veterans and their families transitioning into business ownership, CommBank for Veterans is committed to breaking new ground," CommBank for Veterans senior manager Julie Hall says.

"We are proud to extend this support to our Indigenous veterans community, ensuring they have the financial tools, opportunities and recognition they deserve. Our mission is to empower all those who have served, past and present."

Transitioning from military life to entrepreneurship presents unique challenges

The intersection of military service and business success is not new. Indigenous Australians have long served their country with distinction, and many have transitioned into successful business ownership.

The initiative seeks to build on this legacy, ensuring that Indigenous veterans have the resources they need to thrive in business.

Vafiopulous reinforces this point, saying: "Given the chance, our Indigenous people can do whatever they set their minds to, provided they are given the opportunity and the support for their ideas."

She believes Indigenous veterans, with the right guidance, can excel in industries ranging from the arts and tourism to retail and wholesale.

CommBank's involvement goes beyond financial support. The bank has actively engaged with Indigenous communities and veteran organisations, ensuring their contributions are acknowledged.

Hall says: "Because of this sponsorship, Indigenous families will have a dedicated place where they can tell their stories, boots and all, and not have them edited.

"They will receive the recognition that is justly deserved, as are all veterans. This is what our team believes in and it is our way of saying thank you for your service."

As Anzac Day approaches, this collaboration serves as a timely reminder of the sacrifices made by Indigenous Australians in uniform.

But it also highlights the need for ongoing recognition beyond commemoration. Our Indigenous Veterans is working to ensure that these contributions are formally documented, creating a permanent legacy.

"We cannot change what has been done in the past," Vafiopulous says. "We can not go back to the 20th century and right the wrongs done to our Indigenous servicemen and women, but we can continue to move forward in acknowledging their culture and traditions and treat them as equal in everything."

CommBank's partnership with Our Indigenous Veterans is just one example of how corporate Australia can play a role in reconciliation, not just through words but through meaningful action.

CommBank's partnership with Our Indigenous Heroes is just one example of how corporate Australia can play a role in reconciliation, not just through words but through meaningful action. Simone Kenmore, CommBank's Indigenous Business Banking executive manager and proud Yankunytjatjara woman, reaffirmed the significance of this partnership.

"CommBank proudly honours the contribution of our Australia's Indigenous Veterans through our partnership with Our Indigenous Heroes. This collaboration ensures we're building career pathways for Indigenous veterans to support their business journey and help build a more resilient and empowering future for First Nation businesses and the wider Australian community." ●

The Indigenous Business Review

Great allies working together

Collaborations that promote respect have benefits for all, writes **Dianne Bortoletto**

Indigenous Australians represent about 3 per cent of the national population, yet persistent disparities in health, financial security and access to opportunity remain well-documented.

Rather than focus solely on the challenges, we are highlighting examples of meaningful leadership: businesses and individuals demonstrating effective allyship through practical, measurable support for Indigenous communities.

In a corporate context, being a good ally means more than symbolic gestures; it involves actively using influence, resources and relationships to drive equitable outcomes.

Evolve Communities, a cultural awareness organisation co-founded by an Indigenous and a non-Indigenous leader, defines an ally as someone who advocates for and stands alongside marginalised communities. As Evolve Communities puts it: "Together, we can create a kinder, more inclusive Australia."

In business, this starts with intentional action, sustained commitment and accountability. Throughout our magazine we are proud to feature businesses which that have worked to become good allies, here are even more which have become models for the country.

Fervor

Chef Paul Iskov's resume might read like a who's who of the fine dining world, via his experience gained among the stars at Noma, Eleven Madison Avenue and Dom, among others, but his is a different approach.

Fervor creates intimate pop-up restaurants in incredible and often remote locations where up to 40 guests enjoy degustation dining that makes native ingredients the heroes.

First though, Iskov connects with local Elders, spending time with them to learn about their culinary traditions. Together they go out on Country and, with permission, forage for ingredients that Iskov then masterfully turns into delicious dishes.

Fervor's fully self-sustained operation includes bringing everything, even the kitchen sink, and leaving no trace. Dinners are often held in gorges or beside rivers, in stunning natural environments.

fervor.com.au

Intrepid

Intrepid is an Australian travel company that has been leading small group adventures since 1989. In the past three years, Intrepid has increased its First Nations experiences in Australia from 12 to 43, including arts in the Red Centre (above). Intrepid's non-profit foundation was created in 2002 to empower travellers to give back, and it has since raised more than $18 million for 160 community partners around the world.

A new partnership with Country Needs People is Intrepid's first partnership with a First Nations-owned charity that helps support Country and community directly.

Country Needs People works with First Nations communities to grow, support and secure First Nations land and sea management into the future. As they say, there is no tourism without the protection of Australia's unique land and seascapes that entice travellers here in the first place.

Intrepid matches traveller donations

Clockwise from main: An Intrepid Travel group in Queensland; Fervor's Ben Tyler (left) with chef Paul Iskov; Molly West, Cath MacDougall, Nicole Stokes and Rishaye Shaw from Prepare Produce Provide.

A Racing Together car goes through its paces; founder Garry Connelly, right

to double the impact and will support Country Needs People on its fundraising initiatives, leveraging its inbound and outbound customers in meaningful ways. It's good for Country and good for people.
theintrepidfoundation.org/t/country-needs-people

Racing Together

Racing Together is a not-for-profit charity set up to encourage Indigenous participation in motorsport, with the ultimate objective of developing careers in the industry.

It's the first motorsport initiative of its kind dedicated to providing a structured pathway for young Indigenous talents. It goes beyond the mechanics of racing; it embodies mentorship, life skills and future career development.

Founded by FIA steward and Motorsport Australia Award of Merit recipient Garry Connelly AM and wife Monique, Racing Together's vision is to bridge the gap between dreams and reality.

The motorsport industry employs about 30,000 people. When Connelly learned there was almost no Indigenous participation in motorsport, his initial idea was to sponsor a driver, but it was Formula 1 driver Lewis Hamilton's father, Anthony, who suggested setting up an all-Indigenous team so young people could learn all facets of "the world's most exciting sport".
racingtogether.org

Outback Spirit

Founded in 2001, Outback Spirit is an Australian food company that works with and supports Indigenous growers and communities with a vision to continue bringing Indigenous foods (right) into the mainstream food market. Outback Spirit contributed funds from the sale of its products from 2001 to 2018 to the Coles Indigenous Food Fund, raising over $1.6 million. Coles matched contributions.

In 2008, Outback Spirit was the first native foods business to formally support their Indigenous Australian partners by establishing the Outback Spirit Foundation.
outbackspirit.org.au

Prepare Produce Provide

Prepare Produce Provide runs programs across Western Australia with a vision to inspire vulnerable Indigenous youth to reach their potential through innovative food programs and hospitality.

Prepare Produce Provide founder and educator Cath MacDougall is a non-Indigenous high school teacher who runs the programs outside of working hours. She collaborates with other educators and industry experts to support, encourage and inspire tomorrow's Indigenous culinary leaders.

Prepare Produce Provide has developed its first social enterprise product to raise money for the not-for-profit organisation.

Kepa Kwab (Beautiful Water) is a canned non-alcoholic soda flavoured with ethically sourced native Australian traditional botanicals that involved more than 100 Indigenous youth, from the can artwork to flavour profiling and management of the launch event.
prepareproduceprovide.org/stories-blog/kepa-kwab-hospitality-group-training-hgt-showcase-event

Call for state to take a stake

A Kalgoorlie business agency has urged governments to help bring on growth and development, writes **Brendan Foster**

From left, Goldfields Aboriginal Business Chamber chair Rowena Leslie, vice chair Judd Harris and general manager Melissa Tombs

The Goldfields Aboriginal Business Chamber wants the West Australian government to work more closely with regional chambers to empower First Nations businesses and drive long-term economic change.

The Kalgoorlie-based chamber's general manager Melissa Tombs says governments should engage with Aboriginal business chambers that work directly with these businesses to foster economic growth and development.

"The WA government and national government should be looking to partner with regional Aboriginal business chambers to invest in First Nations' long-term business sustainability," she told the National Indigenous Times.

"This partnership will help close the economic gap, create sustainable employment and ensure that Indigenous communities benefit from the resources and opportunities in their regions.

"Currently there are other organisations funded via the National Indigenous Australians Agency to help start-up Indigenous businesses and even microfinance start-ups, which is fantastic to encourage our First Nations entrepreneurs but there is a lack of initiative and funding for sustainability."

The chamber, about 700km east of Perth, offers a range of services to support Aboriginal businesses in the region, including networking opportunities, business development advice and mentorship.

The GABC provides advocacy and representation for Aboriginal entrepreneurs; it helps with accessing funding and grants; and it offers professional development workshops and events to enhance business skills.

One of the chamber's main goals is to empower First Nations business owners and foster economic growth within the Goldfields community.

"GABC also advocates for First Nations businesses, ensuring their voices are heard in policy and decision-making processes," Tombs says.

"Additionally, they provide training, professional development and access to funding opportunities to help businesses thrive and create sustainable economic impacts in the Goldfields region. By connecting businesses with resources and opportunities, GABC plays a vital role in strengthening the Aboriginal business community."

While the First Nations economy in the Goldfields region has experienced significant positive transformation, Tombs says several Indigenous businesses still face barriers that can hinder their growth and success.

She says some of these barriers are multifaceted and require tailored solutions to address them, but some of the biggest challenges include access to capital and funding, navigating complex bureaucracy and procurement processes, limited capacity and skills development, and geographical isolation.

Despite these hurdles, Tombs says there's a growing number of Aboriginal-owned businesses across various sectors, including mining, construction, tourism, arts and hospitality.

"This growth is largely due to greater access to business support services, funding opportunities and resources provided by organisations like the Goldfields Aboriginal Business Chamber," she says. "The First Nations economy in the Goldfields has become more diverse, resilient and interconnected, marking a positive trajectory towards long-term economic empowerment and self-determination."

The chamber is set to host the inaugural Yuwa Aboriginal Business Conference and Expo at Kalgoorlie's Goldfields Art Centre in June.

Prominent media personality and First Nations advocate Stan Grant will MC some of the events, which will include a keynote speech from renowned chef and Meriam woman Nornie Bero.

Tombs says: "GABC is bringing together stakeholders, business community, marketing opportunities and business developments to achieve business community collaboration, investment opportunities and cross-promotion of Aboriginal businesses.

"The conference will serve as an opportunity to showcase Aboriginal businesses' strengths and also drive new business opportunities." ●

Newman Futures delivers homes, health, happiness

Bradley Hall, former Karlka Nyiyaparli Aboriginal Corporation (KNAC) chairperson, and Melvin Farmer, former Jamukurnu Yapalikurnu Aboriginal Corporation (JYAC) chairperson, sign the 'This is our Dream Cultural Compact'

Traditional Owner groups have joined up to drive positive outcomes for their communities, Diane Bortoletto writes

In 2019, Traditional Owner groups in Newman, Nyiyaparli and Martu, came together to discuss a plan for better health, housing, education and overall wellbeing outcomes for their people.

Other stakeholders have joined Newman Futures, an initiative established to create a diverse, sustainable and inclusive economy, which has already seen positive outcomes.

Crime rates have halved thanks to initiatives implemented by the group, including an emergency food relief project that now delivers more than 200 meals a week to families in need, and a free service that transports Martu back to Country from Newman.

Puntukurnu Aboriginal Medical Service chairman Stanley Watson says it has been great to be a part of Newman Futures and trying to make a difference.

"We have to follow through now, don't fall apart, and just continue, create that safe environment for kids," Watson says.

At the five-year mark of Newman Futures, all stakeholders came together for the first time for a workshop that included local and state governments, WA Police, Traditional Owner groups, mining giant BHP and community organisations. There were 50 representatives in total to map out a plan for the next three years.

Newman Futures is seeking funding for an allocation of houses for short-term medical stays.

What's extraordinary about Newman Futures, according to Creating Communities chief executive Donna Shepherd is the positive vision from Traditional Owners and their continued level of engagement.

"The aims are starting to be realised, and there's more work to be done. People know these kinds of changes are only achievable over a generation, but there is still so much energy for it after six years," says Shepherd.

"BHP has been a massive contributor and Newman Futures wouldn't have happened without them. Their support has been remarkable right from the start."

BHP Newman operations general manager Rod Ballinger says collaboration is at the heart of the workshop."Co-creation is about bringing different voices and perspectives to the decision table to ensure we're having the greatest impact possible," he says.

"I'm passionate about Newman and creating better outcomes for local people, which is why forums like these are so important.

"We can achieve great things when we work together."

Newman Futures is a prime example that the community knows what it needs to attain better outcomes and shows working together benefits all.●

■ *For more, visit newmanfutures.com.au*

BHP

"Working together to heal country. To me that's big!"

Discover how Daniel and the rest of the team from the Banjima Land Rehabilitation program are giving new life to Country.

Scan for more.

Building economic empowerment in the Pilbara

One success story shows what hard work and good partnerships can achieve, writes Zak Kirkup

The mining sector has long been a driving force behind economic opportunities for Indigenous businesses. Companies like Fortescue have actively backed Traditional Owners to build enterprises that create real, lasting impact. Like everything with business, success in this space isn't automatic: it takes the right partnerships, vision and determination to turn opportunities into thriving businesses.

That's exactly what has happened with Syncline Haulage, a company that started from scratch in 2021 and has since grown into a significant operation.

What began as a discussion about a haul road contract at Fortescue's Eliwana mine has evolved into a business that is delivering long-term economic benefits to the Puutu Kunti Kurrama and Pinikura (PKKP) Traditional Owners.

Syncline Haulage director Burchell Hayes is proud of the company's growth in the past few years.

"There is no prouder moment for a Traditional Owner and a Traditional Owner business than to be working on country," says Hayes.

The business recently notched up a major milestone at Fortescue's operations, transporting more than 1 million tonnes of product. A significant achievement for a business that started only four years ago.

"The PKKP representatives are now directors of a company that has significant contracts in the Pilbara and employs dozens of people," says Allan Butson, the driving force behind the company's creation.

Four years ago, Butson, who has spent decades working with Indigenous businesses, sat down with now Syncline director Lennie Ashburton and Fortescue's Indigenous business manager at the time. The discussion was simple: the mining giant needed haulage and road maintenance services.

So, Syncline Haulage was born. "We started from zero. No capital, no trucks. Just the right people with the right intent," Butson says. With Fortescue's backing and ANZ finance, the company secured an initial fleet of eight haul trucks and 30 trailers.

> **"We started from zero. No capital, no trucks, just the right people with the right intent**

"The support of Fortescue was just incredible. Brad Negus, who was the man driving the initial set-up of this, and Martin Drage as well, just incredible to work with," says Butson, reflecting how far they've come in those four short years.

From an initial handful of workers, Syncline has grown to a team of more than 20 operators, four supervisors, a project manager, a general manager and dedicated health and safety personnel.

The biggest impact, though, has been on the Traditional Owners who now sit at the helm of a company that is entirely theirs.

Syncline's story isn't just about a successful Indigenous business, it's about co-operation, partnerships and ultimately the enduring economic self-determination for First Nations people.

Its success is proof that when mining companies back in hard-working Indigenous enterprises, Mob doesn't just participate, they prosper. •

Ikuntji Artists' colourful work has been featured at fashion weeks in Paris, New York, London, Dublin, Melbourne and Auckland

Tiny town's major export success

Ikuntji Artists' work has been displayed and worn all over the world, writes Diane Bortoletto

From Paris Fashion Week to dressing staff at the Australian Consulate in Vietnam, Ikuntji Artists are an export success story.

Just 150 people live in the tiny remote community of Haasts Bluff (Ikuntji), about 200 kilometres west of Alice Springs. More than 100 artists come to Ikuntji Artists to paint at the art centre, and between eight and 10 artists come on a daily basis.

Ikuntji Artists have garnered a following around the world, particularly in France, where there is a lot of interest in their works. Creations include hand-printed cotton, linen and silk fabrics, clothing, jewellery, paintings, accessories and books.

Established in 1992 initially as a women's centre providing catering and services for elderly women and children, Ikuntji changed focus to become an art centre in 2005 with the establishment of the Ikuntji Artists Aboriginal Corporation. The art centre is the cultural hub of the community, maintaining, reinforcing and reinvigorating cultural practices through art.

German born Dr Chrischona Schmidt has lived in Ikuntji since 2012 and manages the art centre, working under the directive of the board with the artists and collaborators.

"It's fascinating that the French have such a strong interest in Aboriginal art," says Schmidt. "Through [International Development for Australian Indigenous Art], we did a collaboration with BHV, a large French department store, turning our fabrics into homewares and an entire area was dedicated to our products. We were the only ones and it's the first time ever they have done anything like this."

IDAIA France, which was founded in 2008, is a social enterprise dedicated to the promotion and support of contemporary Aboriginal creation.

Ikuntji Artists was the first and so far only art centre to hold its own show at 2023 Australian Fashion Week in Sydney. They have also had fabrics and clothes featured at fashion weeks in Paris, New York, London, Dublin, Melbourne and Auckland.

Painting, clothes, fabrics and accessories are exported around the world and the Ikuntji Artists website receives 60,000 visitors each month. The First Nations Businesses Succeeding Internationally Report found that First Nations exporters generated more than $670 million in revenue in 2022-23 and typically employed more than seven times more workers than other First Nations businesses.

Schmidt says Ikuntji Artists gets approached once a month with offers to collaborate.

"We go through a process to ensure both businesses' values are aligned and what is appropriate; it's not only about payment but also about artists' credit, how the work is being used, what it's being used for. We try to find long-term partners, which are more beneficial than one-off licensing agreements."

Ikuntji Artists' export success has attracted attention and the art centre has been presented with the inaugural First Nations Exporter Award for the outstanding international success of First Nations export businesses, a new category at the 63rd Australian Export Awards.

Entries for the 2025 Australian Export Awards, which are run by the Australian Trade and Investment Commission (Austrade), open on April 29. ●

■ *For more information about Ikuntji Artists, visit https://ikuntji.com.au*

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FEATURE | BUSHFOODS

Food grows wildly in abundance all around us, so why aren't we eating more native foods? **Dianne Bortoletto** digs in to find out

Rocket, or rucola in Italian, is a weed found on the side of many a country road in Italy, along with fennel, capers, artichokes and other familiar vegetables. Italians and Greeks have been eating wild food for thousands of years, as have First Australians.

The plants that grow wild in Australia, and have done since the beginning of time, have sustained the world's oldest living culture for 60,000 years.

So why is it that in Australia, we don't find Warrigal greens in packets next to baby spinach and rocket in the supermarket?

Warrigal greens are abundant: they grow wild across Australia (closer to coastal areas); they are nutritious and they require zero care or fertiliser.

Warrigal greens taste delicious, especially when sauteed with garlic and olive oil, or in Asian-style soups, and the baby leaves work beautifully in salads.

It grows in our yard so abundantly that I joke I'm going to open a stall at the Margaret River Farmers' Market and sell it.

The Slow Food Movement's international councillor for Oceania, Vincenzo Velletri, believes it's important we embrace native food.

"It's important for several reasons, first of all because these plants have been living in Australia for thousands of years and are well adapted to the local environment and therefore, they are more resilient," says Velletri.

"The other reason is because of the harsh environment the plants have been living in, they have more nutrients and provide more health benefits; for example, the Kakadu plum has the highest recorded natural amount of vitamin C of any food in the world."

Kakadu plum, or gubinge as it's known in the East Kimberley and the Northern Territory, has up to 100

times the vitamin C of an orange. The vitamin C potency of the small green plum is two and a half times that of Brazil's acai berry and almost five times the antioxidant properties of blueberries, plus it contains lutein, known for improving eye health.

Velletri says Indigenous foods are unique to Australia and could be an asset in our culinary offerings and they could attract gourmet tourists.

"At the last four editions of Terra Madre in Italy, one of the biggest international food events that Slow Food organises, we had a stall where we showcased some of the Australian native foods, which was extremely successful in terms of attraction to our stall and the response from the people coming and tasting it," he says.

"In my opinion, we would need more availability of the products at local level so that our chefs can work with them and promote them to the general public.

"We need more Indigenous people to take responsibility and pride in producing this food and making it more available, and sharing the story, the cultural tradition behind that particular food. We would also need more funds available for the industry to be developed."

Just 2 per cent of businesses in the $50 million Indigenous food industry are Indigenous owned, and this must change. There is an opportunity for Indigenous food businesses to flourish via products that are in demand.

Nyul Nyul man Robert Dann, owner of Bugarrigarra Mie (Dreamtime Food) says the biggest barrier new businesses face in the native food industry is finance, and in his case, space.

Dann says the Aboriginal bush foods that are not yet widely available come with extra costs for the required approvals for commercial sale.

"It cost me $1500 just to get the analysis of the boab powder four or five years ago, but I think this is something the government can do," he says.

Dann is also the owner and operator of Kimberley Cultural Adventures, a tourism business in Broome.

"My passion is the bush foods and getting them out there across Australia, and the tourism business is a job that I do, that I also enjoy, but it's a job to help fund the food business," he says.

"At the moment, we have to send our fruits down south for processing, but I think we should have a processing plant up here, which will help families and create jobs and then we can do it all from here in the Kimberley and end up with a finished product."

One native food success story is the macadamia.

Although Macadamia Australia is not an Indigenous owned business, it has been successful in making the hard-to-crack native nut commonplace in our diets and it was the first native food to be exported.

Containing healthy monosaturated fat, as well as vitamins and dietary fibre, the creamy-textured nuts were introduced to the rest of the world in the late 1800s.

The Australian Macadamia Society says macadamias are now the fourth largest Australian horticultural export. More than 700 growers across three states produce about 50,000 tonnes per year, 70 per cent of which is

> **"We want to see native foods in all pantries across the country**

Dale Tilbrook, left, at right, lays on a feast for some lucky tourists at Mandoon Estate; a boab tree and Robert Dann's Boab muesli; and below, the original success story, macadamia nuts

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MACADAMIA

Author Ian McConachie tells the macadamia story from Gondwanan beginnings to global food crop in The Macadamia, Australia's Gift to the World, a book by independent publishers Australian Scholarly Publishing

exported to 40 countries.

Australian Macadamia Society marketing manager Jacqui Price says the nut can be used as a case study for other native foods.

"The industry transformed a niche native nut into a global success through strategic marketing, international trade partnerships and strong provenance storytelling," Price says.

"Native foods have incredible flavour, health benefits, and cultural significance.

"Expanding their presence in supermarkets, restaurants and packaged foods could help more Australians appreciate their rich heritage and health benefits."

There are some online shops that sell native foods, although most of these are usually in the form of dried herbs, frozen or dried berries, jams, chutneys, beverages and teas. Products that can easily be posted.

In the past decade, fresh native Australian ingredients have been making increasing appearances on restaurant menus. Wattleseed, lemon myrtle, finger lime and samphire are regulars.

While some fresh native foods are widely available, for example kangaroo meat, many others are not, which prompts the question, why not?

Woolworths and Coles were contacted for comment and while a list of specific questions went unanswered, both sent statements.

A Woolworths spokesperson says: "We're committed to investing in Indigenous suppliers, and we currently have a number stocked in our stores across the country, such as Lone Crow coffee and Banyar Jagun cleaning products.

"These suppliers are based across the country from Victoria to the Northern Territory, supplying into hundreds of stores across the country."

A Coles spokesperson says: "We are proud to work with more than 70 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander businesses and suppliers throughout our supply chain.

"There is growing interest in incorporating native Australian ingredients into our product range to connect customers with our local culture and highlight our rich biodiversity." Those are encouraging words, but if the big players in Australia's food supply chain say they are committed to stocking native Australian foods but they have very limited selections on their shelves and none in the fresh food department, it forces Australians to shop elsewhere for native foods.

A pioneer in the native food space and a good ally, Juleigh Robins, owner of Outback Spirit, once had a number of products stocked in Coles, and over the years that has dwindled to just one chutney.

Outback Spirit is an Australian food company that works with and supports Indigenous growers and communities with a vision to continue bringing Indigenous foods into the mainstream food market.

"As an individual, and as a brand, we want to see native foods in all pantries across the country," Robins says.

"There is a degree of fresh food going out to the food industry, but not to consumers and I suspect that's for two reasons; limited fresh supply, and consumer demand."

Robins says the native food industry will take time to mature.

"An interesting fact, botanist Joseph Banks took the seeds of Warrigal greens and grew them in a palace in London, and Napoleon and Josephine took a liking to it, and grew them in France, and now it's very common in France and known as 'tetragon'," she says.

"It's not a parallel here, but just an example of the length of time it takes to get something accepted in the mainstream."

Dale Tilbrook, a Wardandi Bibbulmun woman from the Margaret River, Busselton area, is a pioneer in Indigenous tourism, retail and food. Her Perth business Maalinup offers bush food products and tastings.

"I probably put the first quandong jam on the shelf in 1998 or '99," Tilbrook says.

"Our very own delicious 'superfood' like roasted ground Wattleseed can be added to cakes and biscuits for a nutty flavour, as well as added to stews to thicken and introduce deep umami flavours.

"I can't think of a better way to celebrate Australia's native edibles than to use them on a daily basis."

The best way to support the native food industry is to buy from independent businesses and grocers, to ask for native products to be stocked at your local store, and to have a go at growing your own.

After all, many of them grow like weeds. ●

The Indigenous Business Review

Forgoing cash for sake of culture

Companies that simply want to tick a box on Indigenous engagement just don't measure up for Yaali Collective, writes **Brendan Foster**

First Nations businessman Cleveland McGhie has no regrets about passing up big contracts over the years, because he has remained true to his core values and ethics.

The proud Wiradjuri man and his wife, Wiradjuri woman Tanieka Riley, started up Yaali Collective just under five years ago because he wanted to give First Nations kids an authentic cultural experience.

The NSW-based company uses resources and workshops to support people in learning about Aboriginal cultures in an interactive way that allows them to use their imagination.

"We were on a road trip to see family and just talking about our kids," McGhie told the National Indigenous Times.

"We wanted our kids and other kids to be allowed to engage with culture through education, not just in learning materials but also in different resources and products to engage and use at home or other environments.

"We wanted it to be culturally authentic, and I'm not just talking about an artwork slapped on a puzzle piece and calling it a toy."

It wasn't long before the 29-year-old realised that several companies wanted to work with them because they wanted to tick the right boxes.

But Yaali refused to engage with the businesses, despite missing out on millions of dollars.

"We turned down over $250,000 a year contract, based on them taking one thing away that we say is our core, which is to empower our mob," McGhie says.

"It's probably been one of the biggest challenges, as organisations aren't ready to move to a transformational model and move beyond transactional-based work. We've stuck so strongly to our core values and our ethics, that it's led to, I guess, the demise of a lot of opportunities, although it is what enabled us to start Yaali Collective.

"I will just openly say, many organisations want this tick box approach, just another transactional

Cleveland McGhie, Tanieka Riley and their children; their Yaali Collective toys are designed for interactive education

> **We can put our hand on heart and say, we haven't sold out our culture**

piece. They're not looking to transform or embed more culturally authentic and appropriate matters into their companies and organisations."

The parents of three have also faced some barriers because others perceive that a micro-business wouldn't be able to manage large partnerships.

But McGhie continues to pivot the business and be proactive without "selling out" his core values.

"We're currently working with Play Group NSW and working towards a more formalised partnership and doing some co-designed resources with them as well, and hoping that we'll form a bit more of a formal partnership with them," he says.

"We have also worked closely with another state-based organisation in NSW, YARPA Hub.

"We are certainly open to doing collaborative co-design work at a transformational level, not just slapping an artwork on the back of a deck of cards but doing a resource where users can see, feel and connect to cultural learning as well."

Despite the challenges of running a small business, Yaali Collective is determined to keep the company going because McGhie and Riley are passionate about connecting mob to their culture and "we have an abundance of resources yet to share; we are certainly not gatekeepers".

McGhie has some stern advice for any young First Nations person wanting to start up a business: connect to your culture and let it be what guides you, as it has and will continue to guide us.

"We can put our hand on heart and say, we haven't sold out our culture," McGhie says.

"We know it's also been a bit of a lost business opportunity for us because of it. But we know that we make an impact on our culture that's been lost and disconnected, and the opportunity hasn't been there for our people, our mob every day to connect with their culture in fun, educational ways, as we are providing."

How our boots come together is what really sets them apart.

R.M. Williams

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