

The **Indigenous** Business Review

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OPINION: WHO BENEFITS

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CONTENTS

Moonyah Workforce
SCALING JOBS THROUGH PURPOSE AND PEOPLE4-5

Kimberley Cotton
INFRASTRUCTURE UNLOCKING A NEW INDUSTRY7-9

Beyond procurement
WHY CONTRACTS ALONE DON'T BUILD BUSINESSES11-13

Native foods, native control
GROWING INDUSTRY, LIMITED RETURNS TO COMMUNITY15

Economic power debate
WHO REALLY BENEFITS FROM GROWTH?16-17

Care on Country
HEALTHCARE BUILT BY COMMUNITY, FOR COMMUNITY18-19

First jobs matter
LINKING TRAINING DIRECTLY TO EMPLOYMENT26-27

Winyama ownership shift
FROM JOINT VENTURE TO FULL CONTROL30-31

Cover image: Mineral Resources



The Indigenous Business Review

This edition turns on a central question: Who benefits from Indigenous economic growth, and how?

Our analysis of the **native foods** industry makes the issue plain. Cultural knowledge is driving a rapidly expanding market, yet returns to community remain marginal. Calls for stronger protections and Indigenous-led governance point to a deeper question of control.

That question is challenged directly in **Dr Hannah McGlade's** opinion, which warns that without structural reform, economic empowerment risks becoming another form of trickle-down. Her critique sits alongside **Darren Godwell's** argument that economic participation must sit at the centre of Closing the Gap. At the enterprise level, **Winyama's** transition to full Aboriginal ownership shows the importance of control over data, capability and direction. In the Pilbara, the Ramirez-Smith sisters are building a culturally grounded healthcare model that returns services to community. In construction, **IMACA's** work in the Kimberley demonstrates how major projects can translate into wages, skills and local economic activity when Indigenous businesses are embedded in delivery. The **Kimberley cotton gin** extends that further, aligning infrastructure, capital and traditional owner equity at scale.

Our roundtable with **Mineral Resources** reinforces the same point: procurement alone is insufficient. Growth requires capital, capability and long-term partnerships working together.

At the workforce level, the partnership between **Johnathan Thurston**, Coles and the JTA connects training directly to employment, addressing a persistent gap between preparation and opportunity.

From tourism to truth-telling, **Walter McGuire** reminds us economic participation is also cultural work. The through line is clear. Economic participation is not the outcome. It is the system. The challenge now is ensuring it is designed to deliver for all.



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We wanted to build a safe house where people from any walk of life can get the opportunity to work

It all comes down to teamwork

What the Faingaa brothers learnt on the field, they are applying in their working lives, **Reece Harley** reports

When Anthony Faingaa finished his professional rugby career, he faced a question that many elite athletes eventually confront. After years of discipline, structure and identity tied to sport, where do you go next?

For Faingaa, the answer was not immediately obvious. What was clear, however, was that the transition from elite performance into the workforce was not straightforward.

"I sort of thought, 'where do people like me after 17 years of rugby get an opportunity to work?'," he says.

That question became the starting point for what is now Moonyah Workforce, an Indigenous-owned labour hire and workforce solutions business operating across construction, infrastructure, resources and civil sectors. Founded in 2019, the business has grown rapidly. Today it deploys between 200 and 500 workers daily in NSW, Queensland, Western Australia and the Northern Territory, supported by an internal team of about 20 staff and a large fleet of traffic control vehicles.

Yet for Faingaa, scale is not the defining measure of success. "If I can provide opportunities for people, the rest will look after itself," he says.

From rugby to recruitment

Faingaa and his twin brother Saia built their careers in elite rugby, playing at the highest levels in Australia. The lessons from that environment now shape how

the business operates. "I'm in the people business. Everyone's getting out of people," Faingaa says.

The comparison between sport and business is direct. In rugby, success depends on aligning individuals with different strengths and perspectives towards a shared outcome. In workforce services, the same principle applies for job sites, crews and client expectations.

"Every week, we bring people together with totally different opinions to try and get an outcome. That's exactly what we do now," he says.

'Safe house' built on family values

The name "Moonyah", which comes from the Bundjalung language, translates to "safe house". It reflects the founders' cultural heritage and the environment they are trying to create.

"We wanted to build a safe house where people from any walk of life can get the opportunity to work," Faingaa says.

That philosophy is grounded in personal experience. Raised in Queanbeyan, NSW, Faingaa speaks candidly about growing up in a family that worked hard and valued respect above all else. His father worked multiple jobs. His mother and grandmother were central figures in shaping the family.

"My mum was the backbone," he says. "My mum and my grandmother were just the strongest women in my life."

His Aboriginal heritage, including a grandmother who was part of the Stolen



Clockwise from top left: Saia and Anthony Faingaa during their first Wallabies game together; Saia, left, and Anthony with a client; the brothers on a worksite; the brothers with former Queensland transport minister Mark Bailey; as Wallabies in 2011



Generations, has also shaped his perspective on identity and responsibility. From a young age, he and his brother worked to reconnect with their culture and community.

That experience now informs how the business engages with people.

"Whether you're a billion dollar businessman or you're, you know, to get into the pub like my father did, we give you the same respect," he says.

Labour hire, but not as a transaction

At its simplest, Moonyah Workforce provides labour hire and traffic management services. That includes supplying workers to construction sites, manufacturing facilities, mining operations and infrastructure projects.

But Faingaa is clear that the business is not designed to operate as a transactional intermediary.

"There are a lot of labour hire companies. But we're not a faceless business," he says.

Instead, the company focuses on maintaining a connection with its workforce, even as it scales. Induction processes emphasise the company's story, values and purpose. Leadership

remains visible on sites. Workers are treated as part of a broader system rather than interchangeable inputs.

This approach is also critical in a competitive labour market.

"If the business doesn't mean something to our workers, they'll go somewhere else for another dollar," Faingaa says.

Diversity, not exclusion

As a Supply Nation-certified Indigenous business, Moonyah Workforce operates within Australia's Indigenous procurement landscape. However, Faingaa is deliberate in how he frames the company's role.

"We give anyone an opportunity. Black, white or yellow," he says.

Around 15 to 20 per cent of the workforce identifies as Indigenous, alongside a significant proportion of female employees. The emphasis is on inclusion rather than restriction.

"I look at us as a diverse business. An equal opportunity business," he says.

At the same time, the company plays an important role in supporting Indigenous workers into employment. That includes creating culturally safe

environments where communication is prioritised and expectations are managed with clients.

"If people need time, they need time. Our job is to communicate that properly with the client," Faingaa says.

The goal is to remove barriers that often lead to disengagement or job loss, while maintaining accountability and continuity of work.

Growth, capital and capability

Like many fast-growing service businesses, Moonyah Workforce has relied on access to working capital to scale. Faingaa credits strong banking relationships for enabling that growth, particularly in structuring finance for equipment, vehicles and operational expansion.

The business has also invested in technology, using digital systems and AI tools to improve efficiency in areas such as job allocation and administration.

"If I started this seven years ago without the technology we have now, I would have needed twice the staff," he says. This combination of labour-intensive service delivery and technology-enabled operations reflects

a broader shift in the sector. While automation may reshape parts of the economy, Faingaa sees continued demand for skilled and semi-skilled labour. "We're focusing on the people business because everyone's getting out of it," he says.

Looking ahead

For Faingaa, the next phase of growth is both commercial and symbolic.

The Brisbane 2032 Olympic Games represent a major opportunity. He wants to see Moonyah Workforce visible at a national level, contributing to major projects and representing Indigenous business capability on a global stage.

"I would love people to see Moonyah cars and people representing Aboriginal businesses when they arrive," he says.

Beyond that, the ambition is straightforward.

"I'd love to give a thousand people the opportunity to work," he says.

It is an ambition grounded less in scale for its own sake, and more in what scale represents. Each additional placement is another person connected to income, stability and a pathway forward.

For Faingaa, that remains the measure that matters. ●

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The KingKira Group is a business 100% owned by Pilbara Aboriginal woman, Tammy O'Connor.

With links to Traditional Owner groups, KingKira's commitment to managing the environment for future generations is genuine. This shows in their work at BHP's South Flank site and throughout the Pilbara.



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Ord Country cottons on



There was much ado about something when northern Australia's first cotton processing facility opened in August in Kununurra on time and budget.

Hundreds of locals, growers, farmers, traditional owners, federal and state government leaders celebrated the northwestern town's landmark \$60m Kimberley Cotton Gin, all hopeful the facility would usher in a billion-dollar industry following decades of trials, tribulations and strategic planning.

No one had more at stake than the Kimberley Cotton Company, a consortium of three organisations - the Ord River District Cooperative, Kimberley Agricultural Investment and the Miriwung Gajerrong Corporation - established in 2021 to construct and manage the new cotton processing

A budding industry looks set to deliver a billion-dollar bonanza to northern Australia, David Prestipino reports

facility. But the stakeholders would be feeling fine about early signs that northern Australia's cotton industry could become a billion-dollar industry, with economic fortunes now favoured by the massive cost savings of transporting raw cotton 3500km to Townsville in Queensland.

The gin facility 3000km northeast of Boorloo/Perth produced its inaugural harvest of cotton from the Ord Valley's vast farmlands, notching 81,000 bales when the last modules were processed in its first year.

Kimberley Cotton Gin was away, thanks in part to the region's growers planting a record 10,000 hectares across the Ord Valley in preparation for

local processing, up from 2200 hectares the previous season.

For many established local farmers, 2025 was their biggest year of cotton production. There were also fresh insights on maximising the crop's potential.

It was a result key investor NAIF anticipated. Its \$34m investment in the Kimberley Cotton Gin was based on its estimated creation of \$240m for the region and eventual billion-dollar industry nationwide.

The facility would provide capacity for the already successful industry to grow, initially processing between 100,000 and 120,000 bales a year and creating a 1000-plus workforce in the next decade.


NAIF's partnership with the Kimberley Cotton Company supported the construction and operation of the gin facility.

Set on a 79.4ha site, the gin runs entirely on hydro-electricity, making its power supply 100 per cent renewable and easing road transport costs for Kimberley growers to get their cotton processed.

Just the beginning

NAIF chief executive Craig Doyle said the Kununurra Cotton Gin was a major step to establishing a robust and sustainable cotton industry in the region.

"We're proud to have supported this project from investment decision in 2021 through to opening," he said.

Kimberley Cotton Company chair Jim Engelke, who is also the KAI general manager, said the cotton gin was 

The Indigenous Business Review

➤ just the beginning of development opportunities in the region.

“Investment is needed in enabling logistics, export facilities and the incremental increase in cattle management,” Mr Engelke said.

NAIF has so far committed \$4.3bn in loans across 32 projects in northern Australia, supporting around 18,000 jobs. The fund said equitable and sustainable projects involving northern Australia’s growing First Nations population – representing 14 per cent of the total population compared to the 3 per cent average – was crucial to driving growth and local workforce and industry supply chains.

Traditional owner group in the mix

Traditional owner participation has been central to the industry’s development, with the Miriuwung and Gajerrong Corporation now moving beyond traditional land use agreements to active commercial partnerships.

The Corporation is a founding shareholder and partner in the Kimberley Cotton Company, and holds a 10 per cent stake in the \$60m processing facility.

It has conducted its own cotton growing trials on traditional lands, such as the Goomig land parcels, in a joint venture with Cubbie Farming, and ensured the KCG included specific commitments to First Nations employment, training and use of local Indigenous suppliers.

The facility not only makes local cotton crops such as those on the Miriuwung and Gajerrong Corporation’s Goomig land more viable, but would help drive generational wealth across the region, with more than 1000 new jobs on MG Country expected in the next decade.

Kimberley’s local cattle industry would also benefit, with cottonseed – a by-product of ginning – an important source of animal feed.

The Miriuwung and Gajerrong Corporation’s cotton investment has extended beyond its stake in the processing facility. The organisation recently partnered with Duxton Farms to assist its cotton production across its Goomig farmlands, recently producing its first cotton crop.

“We’re proud to be involved in this



Clockwise from main: Kimberley cotton is harvested and baled; Wyndham Port has first point of entry status; special envoy for northern Australia Luke Gosling and federal Resources Minister Madeleine King at the Kimberley gin; Kimberley Cotton Company

significant project,” the Miriuwung and Gajerrong Corporation said. “The facility and cotton industry here will benefit MG Country and its people for decades to come, with opportunities to expand our cotton crops across the Ord.”

After positive initial trials in 2017, through a record wet season, more than 350ha of the Ord River Irrigation Area was planted with cotton in 2018, which grew to circa 1000ha following continued positive trial outcomes.

A major agricultural hub near

Kununurra utilising Lake Argyle and the Ord River for gravity-fed irrigation, the ORIA covers more than 28,000ha, producing sandalwood, chia and fruits such as mangoes and melons, along with cotton. Expansion plans into the Northern Territory would see the area exceed 50,000ha, with the ORIA’s key advantage in cotton production over eastern Australia being access to irrigated land, with a 95 per cent reliable water supply and consistently low water costs from Lake Argyle helping achieve

stable yields each season. Adjustment of cotton farming practices across the Kimberley are expected before next harvest, including growing shorter cotton, factoring in nutritional considerations, and improved irrigation systems and supply chains to maximise production and operational efficiency.

Wyndham Port powers exports

Cotton grown will not only be processed



“ The facility and cotton industry will benefit MG Country and its people for decades

in northern Australia but exported through nearby Wyndham Port, whose crucial role to opening up the industry drew Prime Minister Anthony Albanese there during a visit to Kununurra in January.

Growers in the Ord were buoyed when the Port of Wyndham, 100km northwest of Kununurra, gained First Point of Entry status from the federal government last year, with the first shipment of locally grown cotton – 60 containers each carrying about 104 bales – recently

exported. Having FPOE status will allow the Wyndham Port to receive empty containers for immediate export and enable direct international shipping for the local cotton industry.

Mr Engelke said the processing facility and port upgrades were welcome in northern Australia, where development was often difficult. “There are always significant challenges due to the remote location. Remaining flexible and focused is necessary to keep the project progressing,” he said.

Mr Engelke believes having the ability to export local products such as cotton could usher a “major economic shift for the region”.

“It’s an exciting time for the whole region, and the unique challenges agriculture faces up here just make the outcomes all the more rewarding.”

He believed the gin facility would strengthen Australia’s reputation as a major cotton exporter and create opportunities in the country’s northernmost regions. Flow-on industries are also expected as cotton farming across northern Australia grows, with other service industries likely stimulated, such as farm support, transport services, equipment supply and maintenance, further embedding economic activity across the region. ●

ECONOMIC IMPACT

The cotton industry is expected to provide substantial long-term financial and structural benefits to the East Kimberley region:

- **PUBLIC BENEFIT:** Independent analysis forecasts \$248 million to \$386 million in public benefits over the next 20 years.
- **JOB CREATION:** The industry is estimated to create over 1000 direct and indirect local jobs within its first 10 years.
- **EXPORT REVENUE:** Cotton lint exports are projected to generate approximately \$1.19 billion.
- **INDUSTRY SYNERGY:** Local processing produces cottonseed as a by-product, providing a high-quality, low-cost livestock feed for the cattle industry.
- **INFRASTRUCTURE & SUSTAINABILITY:** The gin is powered by 100% renewable



hydroelectricity from Lake Argyle, significantly reducing the carbon footprint compared to traditional gas-powered gins.

TRADITIONAL OWNER INVOLVEMENT

The Miriuwung Gajerrong (MG) people are central to the industry’s structure, moving beyond traditional land-use agreements to active commercial partnership.

- **EQUITY OWNERSHIP:** The MG Corporation (representing the Miriuwung and Gajerrong people) is a founding shareholder and partner in the Kimberley Cotton Company. They hold a 10 per cent stake in the \$60 million processing facility.
- **AGRICULTURAL PRODUCTION:** MG

Corporation conducts its own cotton growing trials on traditional lands, such as the Goomig land parcels, in a joint venture with Cubbie Farming.

- **EMPLOYMENT & TRAINING:** The project includes specific commitments to First Nations employment, training and use of local Indigenous suppliers.
- **DECISION-MAKING:** As a founding member of the KCC, MG Corporation has a direct voice in the strategic direction and the operation of the industry.



TRIALS AND TRIBULATIONS

- **FIRST ATTEMPT (1960s and 1970s):** Cotton was first tried in the Ord River Irrigation Area over 50 years ago, but this initial attempt failed due to severe pest issues.
- **TRANSGENIC TRIALS (1990s):** The introduction of genetically modified (transgenic) cotton in the mid-1990s allowed for better pest control. A small-scale gin was opened in Kununurra in October 1997 to process these initial trial crops.

- **MODERN RESURGENCE (2018 to 2021):** The industry began a major “comeback” around 2018. The Kimberley Cotton Company was formally established in April 2021 to build the region’s first modern, multi-user processing facility.
- **FULL COMMERCIALISATION (2025):** The completion of the \$60 million gin in 2025 marked the “launch of an exciting new industry” for WA’s north, enabling local processing rather than transporting raw cotton 3500km interstate.

Supporting the next generation.

Challenge accepted.

In the Pilbara town of Roebourne, new facilities at Roebourne District High School are creating modern learning spaces where culture sits at the centre of education.

Woodside contributed \$20 million to the school's redevelopment through the Resources Community Investment Initiative, building on long-term support for education through the Karratha and Roebourne Education Initiative.

The project includes new classrooms, science facilities, a library and a dedicated cultural hub supporting language and cultural programs.

Woodside continues supporting community organisations delivering health, cultural and community initiatives which support people across the Pilbara.





Mineral Resources director
Colleen Hayward

Life beyond the contract

A boriginal business leaders, corporate executives and finance representatives have called for a shift in how Indigenous procurement is approached, warning that access to contracts alone is insufficient to build sustainable businesses.

The discussion took place at a roundtable in Perth hosted by Mineral Resources (MinRes), bringing together Aboriginal business owners at different stages of growth alongside representatives from ANZ.

The session, chaired by MinRes independent non-executive director and Noongar leader Colleen Hayward,

Collaboration is key to establishing, funding and building a sustainable enterprise, Zak Kirkup reports

focused on what it takes not only to start an Aboriginal business, but also what is needed to sustain and grow it over time.

A consistent message emerged: long-term success depends on aligned growth between businesses, their clients and access to capital.

ANZ head of First Nations strategy Shelley Cable said partnerships between corporates, financiers and Aboriginal businesses were critical to unlocking growth. "ANZ can't do this by ourselves. MinRes can't do it by themselves. First

Nations businesses can't do it by themselves," she says. "But with the three parties together, we've been able to accelerate getting finance into the hands of First Nations businesses."


Cable pointed to ANZ's First Nations Guarantee Program, delivered in partnership with MinRes and other corporate guarantors, which has enabled businesses that would otherwise not meet traditional lending criteria to access finance.

However, participants made clear that

access to finance and contracts was only the starting point.

MinRes manager of Aboriginal business development Ashley Carey says the miner has adopted a hands-on approach to supporting Aboriginal contractors beyond procurement.

"We don't just set and forget," Carey says. "We attend quarterly financial reviews; we look at cashflow projections; and we work with them on site to make sure they're supported operationally. It's a labour-intensive process, but it's the only way to get proper outcomes."

Carey says the program is supporting about 10 Aboriginal businesses and is 

The Indigenous Business Review

expanding into more diverse sectors, including recruitment, landscaping and services.

He also says traditional finance models remain a barrier.

"The traditional models are quite rigid," he says. "Trying to get money from government sources can be challenging."

For business owners, the challenges are often practical and immediate.

PMW Industries managing director Paula White, a Banjima Traditional Owner, describes building her business without access to early-stage finance.

"I went to the bank and asked for a loan, and they said no," she says.

"So as more money came into the business, I would go and buy equipment or vehicles outright and then work out how long it would take to get a return."

White says financial discipline, particularly around tax and payroll obligations, is critical to survival.

"You pay your tax, you pay your BAS, you pay your super," she says.

"At the end of the day, the money in the business is not yours."

She also highlights the cost of workforce onboarding in the resources sector, estimating it could cost up to \$3000 per employee before they are operational. "If they leave, you don't get that back," she says. "And then you have to start again."

The issue of financial literacy was identified as a key risk area for emerging businesses.

Carey says some businesses struggle when initial payments are received.

"They see big chunks of money come in, and they don't realise there's tax, payroll and other liabilities coming," he says.

Noongar business leader Sharna Collard, the CEO of Kooya, the first and largest Aboriginal-owned salary packaging company, which also specialises in fleet leasing and rentals, says sustainable growth requires time and trust between clients and suppliers.

"It's the incremental growth that Kooya has had that has enabled me to grow with my customer base," she says.

"You have to prove your worth. If anything, you have to do tenfold that."

Collard says Kooya's growth has been built on long-term relationships with clients, allowing the company to expand its services over time.

She also spoke about Kooya's transition from a joint venture to full Aboriginal ownership.

"We bought our shareholders out, and it's been the best decision that I've ever made," she says. "It was the most liberating experience."

Joint ventures were a major point of discussion: participants said poorly structured agreements can limit Aboriginal ownership and control.

"There are a lot of predators out there," Carey says. "People see an attachment to an Aboriginal business as

a way into procurement." Collard says better standardisation of joint venture agreements is needed.

"It can work, but the foundations need to be set correctly from the beginning," she says.

Paula White says cultural alignment is often overlooked in joint ventures.

"The leaders have to build that culture on the ground," she says.

"Otherwise it becomes a them-and-us environment."

The discussion also addressed broader structural challenges, including

competition within the sector and limited collaboration between Aboriginal businesses.

Collard says there is growing momentum towards collaboration but more progress is needed. "I don't think we're doing enough yet, but we're on the right trajectory," she says.

White is more direct.

"A lot of businesses go about doing their own thing and don't want to collaborate," she says.

However, Georgina Bobby, founder of Jaliyarnu Yinta, which plays a critical role



Clockwise from main: Georgina Bobby, founder of Jaliyarnu Yinta; Kooya CEO Sharna Collard; Shelley Cable of ANZ Bank; PMW Industries director Paula White; Ashley Carey of MinRes



You have to prove your worth. If anything, you have to do tenfold that



in maintaining the landscape at MinRes' Onslow Iron project, says attitudes are beginning to shift.

"In the beginning, I was against other Indigenous businesses coming into our area," she says. "But then I thought, 'there are lots of other companies coming in. Why not support each other?'"

Bobby started her business recently with support from MinRes and ANZ, including access to finance and small business grants.

"I had no interest at all in starting a

business," she says. "But I took the opportunity while it was there." She says the business is named after her traditional Country and is intended to support future generations.

"It's for my kids and my grandchildren," she says.

Participants also said Aboriginal businesses often operated with broader social objectives than mainstream enterprises.

Collard says Kooya directs 5 per cent of its net profits into community programs through the Bibbulmun Fund.

"That allows us to balance purpose and profit," she says.

White says her approach is less formal but equally important.

"I don't advertise what I do," she says.

"If someone needs help, I help."

Cable says this difference should be better understood by corporate clients.

"It's about what the business enables you to do, and what success looks like," she says. "That's where First Nations businesses are different."

She also challenges organisations to examine their motivations.

"Are you procuring from First Nations businesses because of a spend target?" she says. "Or is it because you want to contribute to a social outcome? Your approach needs to reflect your intent."

The roundtable concluded with calls for stronger collaboration across industry and more structured support for emerging Aboriginal businesses.

Carey suggested establishing regular forums to connect business owners at different stages.

"We've got different generations of businesses in the room," he says.

"Bringing experience and ambition together is critical."

Cable pointed to broader economic trends, noting that First Nations businesses generated more than \$16 billion in revenue in 2021-22 and are projected to exceed \$50 billion annually by 2035. "There's even more to come," she says.

Participants agreed that while momentum was building, sustained growth would depend on deeper partnerships, better-designed procurement frameworks and continued investment in capability.

Hayward said the challenge now was to turn discussion into action and ensure Aboriginal businesses are supported to grow beyond initial opportunity into long-term, self-sustaining enterprises.

"MinRes is committed to supporting Aboriginal businesses in practical ways that go beyond simply counting the extent of financial investment through procured contracts to real capability-building," she says. ●

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Native food for thought

A boriginal leaders and researchers are calling for stronger protections to ensure Indigenous people have greater control over traditional foods and the knowledge connected to them.

The push has been outlined in commentaries published in the Australian and New Zealand Journal of Public Health, bringing together the views of six Aboriginal academics and one non-Indigenous researcher with expertise in bush foods, traditional Indigenous medicines, policy and law.

As Australia's native food industry continues to grow, the authors say Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people must have a genuine say in how native foods are accessed, used and commercialised, while also sharing more fairly in the benefits.

Lead author Dr Luke Williams, a Gumbaynggirr man from northern NSW and a University of Queensland researcher, says native plants remain

Indigenous people want more of a say in an industry worth \$140 million, Jackson Clark reports

deeply connected to Aboriginal identity, health and culture.

"Access to our traditionally used plant sources have been vastly eroded by colonisation," Williams says.

"Many Indigenous people have been displaced from their traditional lands, natural resources have been destroyed or control has been taken away, and knowledge systems around how best to maintain and use these resources is increasingly lost.

"Climate change is also creating a new threat for our natural plant resources."

He said improving access to traditional foods could deliver cultural, health and economic benefits for communities.

"Greater access and resourcing to help our communities access and develop traditionally used native foods would offer a range of benefits," Williams says.

"It provides opportunities to be active

and moving around on Country, a mechanism for youth to be learning culture from Elders, eating healthy foods and caring for Country.

"There are also economic opportunities that can be developed from the sale and development of native plants and botanicals."

Williams also raised concerns about the way Indigenous knowledge was being used within a fast-growing commercial sector, saying Aboriginal communities see very little of the financial return.

"Native foods are a \$100 million dollar industry in Australia. Well-known examples include ingredients like lemon myrtle, Davidson plum, finger lime, wattle seed and Kakadu plum," he says.

"A 2020 report looking at 13 native plants, all of which have a long history of use in Aboriginal communities,

estimated the industry would be worth \$140 million in 2025.

"Yet, it is estimated that a minuscule amount, less than 1 per cent of industry revenue, goes to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities."

He also pointed to Black-cladding as a major issue.

"The most outrageous thing we hear about is Black-cladding, where non-Indigenous companies use Aboriginal art or words that imply community involvement or engagement," Williams says.

"We need strong government action now to protect against this cultural appropriation, so that consumers can make informed decisions when purchasing these products."

The authors are calling for laws to ban misleading Indigenous branding; the creation of a certification mark for genuine Indigenous products; an Indigenous-led national industry body; and regional hubs to support local bush food businesses. ●

Enable prosperity to end poverty

About 420,000 Indigenous Australians currently live at or below the poverty line – more than 40 per cent of the Indigenous population. The figure is not static. It is rising. In macroeconomic terms, this represents a substantial working-age cohort operating below productive capacity within an economy facing labour shortages and demographic ageing.

For nearly two decades, governments of all persuasions have pursued “Closing the Gap” through a framework of social policies: health, education, housing and justice. The effort has been sustained, bipartisan and well-intentioned. Yet 18 years on, outcomes remain uneven and, in several domains, they have stalled or deteriorated.

Two decades on, it is reasonable and responsible to recognise that the current approach, on its own, is no longer sufficient. This does not mean the effort was misplaced. It does suggest that the next phase of reform requires a broader lens.

Australia cannot administer its way out of Indigenous poverty.

Progress now calls for a shift in mindset: from poverty to prosperity, from welfare to economics. The evidence increasingly suggests that Closing the Gap is constrained by a structural weakness: a failure to treat Indigenous economic participation as foundational.

Australia has largely treated Indigenous disadvantage as a service delivery challenge. An implicit logic has been that improved social conditions will enable economic participation. The evidence increasingly points in the opposite direction: durable social outcomes follow stable income, workforce attachment and asset accumulation. I believe that Indigenous economic participation is not the final stage of reform – it is the stabilising platform beneath it.

Without sustained income growth and First Nations wealth formation, personal improvements in health and systemic gains in education remain vulnerable to reversal. Without enterprise development and business ownership, redistribution becomes the dominant instrument of reform. Redistribution has a role, but it cannot substitute for production.

The demographic context makes this economically material. Nearly one million Australians identify as Indigenous, and about 600,000 of these are under the age of 30. This is one of the few expanding working-age cohorts in the country. At a time when Australia’s dependency ratio is rising and productivity growth has softened, this cohort represents an economic variable worthy of activation. In productivity terms, the question is not whether support is required. It is



whether the economy is structured, particularly our regional economies, to absorb this capability at scale.

Here a second poverty emerges. The first poverty is measurable: lower incomes, weaker health outcomes and the associated social outcomes that flow from them.

The second poverty is harder to quantify but more binding: a poverty of economic imagination.

There is a hesitation to conceive Indigenous Australians as routine actors within the economy – as capital allocators, enterprise builders, investors, directors and decision-makers – rather than primarily as beneficiaries of social policy.

When Indigenous Australians are imagined primarily within a social framework of deficits, policy instruments emphasise services, programs and transfers. When they are imagined as economic actors, policy instruments organise around investment, productivity, capital access and market participation. This distinction has practical consequences.

Indigenous businesses have demonstrated strong employment intensity and local reinvestment effects. They are growing in numbers at record rates.

Indigenous women are leading enterprises across sectors, from professional services to construction to cultural industries. First Nations corporations are developing long-term economic strategies aligned to 15- and 20-year horizons. These are not isolated successes; they are structural signals.

Indigenous economic participation is oft times treated as discretionary rather than embedded. The multiplier therefore remains below potential, not because capability is absent, but because scale is not intended.

If Indigenous Australians are expected to orbit the economic system, policy will continue to reinforce orbit. If they are expected to shape it, policy will align accordingly.

This is not an argument against social investment. It is an argument for sequencing and integration.

The economic engine must be sufficiently powered if social objectives are to be sustained.

Nations do not eliminate poverty solely through redistribution. They do so by enabling citizens to generate income, accumulate assets and exercise economic agency within the market economy.

Indigenous Business Australia’s expanded role is structural. It is to support Indigenous Australians and First Nations institutions to design, finance and execute economic strategies that endure beyond annual program appropriations.

The Commonwealth holds significant economic levers: procurement policy, project pipelines in energy transition and infrastructure, financing partnerships, regulatory certainty and capital mobilisation. When these levers are treated as binding economic instruments rather than supportive measures, Indigenous labour participation and regional productivity follow.

Until both poverties are addressed, the material poverty we measure and the imaginative poverty that limits how we structure opportunity, progress will remain incremental and fiscally expensive.

The constraint is no longer capability. It is the boundary of what we collectively consider normal. If that boundary expands, economic participation will expand with it. I contend that when Indigenous economic participation expands at scale, social outcomes will follow – not as targets to be managed, but as by-products of prosperity. •

■ Darren Godwell is the chair of Indigenous Business Australia



Progress, profits must be fair and shared

According to a recent report by Supply Nation, Western Australia had accounted for \$2.1 billion in Indigenous procurement spend, representing 36 per cent of the national spend with Supply Nation suppliers.

You might think this would mean good news for WA. Increased Aboriginal employment opportunities and wealth should improve the dire situation we see in relation to Aboriginal inequality. But that's simply not the case.

Black-cladding, the practice where so-called 'Aboriginal' companies are largely operating as white businesses, is widespread. You only need to look at company profiles to see the one Aboriginal self-identified business owner amid a sea of white faces.

Very often, companies promoted as successful Aboriginal businesses have superficial commitment to social impact and are absent in Aboriginal community life. We see business cards embossed with our Noongar language and wonder who they are.

Clearly the Indigenous Procurement Policy has grown some genuine Aboriginal businesses in the for-profit sector, but isn't it time for government to turn its attention to growing the community-owned enterprise sector where profits will be invested back into

the community? Aboriginal incarceration, deaths in custody, violence to women, child removals, suicides and destruction of sacred lands are pressing issues, along with the crisis of methamphetamine addictions blighting families' lives.

It's shocking that even with so many Noongar kids being removed today, where addictions and family violence are present, we have no on-Country healing centres to turn this around and break the cycle of trauma, addictions and violence and the separation of kids from families.

Economic empowerment advocates simply don't engage in the lived experiences of many Aboriginal people, particularly the urban dispossessed. These policies are avoiding necessary public scrutiny, even though the promise that this wealth will trickle down is highly questionable.

Take the recent sale of Indigenous Land and Sea Council subsidiary Voyages Indigenous Tourism, which included the Ayers Rock Resort and Mossman Gorge Cultural Centre in Far North Queensland, to a US private equity firm.

It was painted as a win-win for the ILSC even though it barely recouped the costs of purchasing Ayers Rock Resort for a sum well above its market valuation at the time. The accumulated net loss over the 15 years of ILSC ownership was just

under \$101 million. Capital expenditure on the asset was \$250.5 million.

These funds were supposed to be used to buy land for Aboriginal people whose native title was extinguished according to the Native Title Act. This loss of land reparations to many dispossessed urban people is shocking.

The Australian National Audit Office has revealed that \$70 billion in Commonwealth exemptions were granted by the National Indigenous Australians Agency so that Commonwealth departments could avoid using Indigenous businesses.

The Office of the Registrar of Indigenous Corporations is tasked with ensuring integrity in the sector, yet it relies on individuals' self-identification of Aboriginality, when we know that this kind of honour system routinely leads to fraud and exploitation. It has in Australia and in Canada, where recently, 2000 claimed Aboriginal businesses were removed from the registry in the face of widespread concerns.

According to Minister for Indigenous Australians Malarndirri McCarthy, the federal government's commitment includes extending and strengthening the IPP with \$23.9 million over five years from 2024-25 to boost opportunities for First Nations businesses to grow and to create jobs.

Under new criteria, businesses must show they are at least 51 per cent First Nations owned and controlled (or registered with ORIC) to access Commonwealth IPP contracts. Additionally, the government will work with regulators to identify opportunities to improve mechanisms to report black-cladding.

Ultimately, none of this goes far enough to address black-cladding and fraud. Aboriginal nations must be empowered to determine who is recognised as Aboriginal according to the three-part Aboriginal identity test set out in the High Court's Mabo decision (1992) and accepted in policy for decades.

We also need a clear requirement of social impact on the part of Aboriginal businesses accessing opportunities through Indigenous procurement policies for the communities they claim to be part of.

It is not too much to ask.

The alternative, the status quo, means a growing divide between a minority benefiting from individual wealth creation, and the majority who continue to face systemic failure in the country's commitment to genuine racial equality and human rights. ●

■ *Dr Hannah McGlade is a Kurin Minang human rights expert and a law academic*



In Port Hedland, access to healthcare has never been straightforward. Distances are vast, services are stretched and for many Aboriginal families, the health system itself can feel unfamiliar and difficult to navigate. It is a reality the Ramirez-Smith sisters have known since birth.

As premature triplets, Lauren, Roberta and Jacinta were flown to Perth because the local hospital did not have the capacity to deliver them safely. It was an early introduction to a pattern that continues to shape life in the Pilbara: when care is needed, it is sometimes far away.

On their maternal grandmother's side, the family are Nyamal traditional

Hands-on help in touch with Country

In the Pilbara, physiotherapy was hard to find, but not any longer, Reece Harley reports

owners, with ties to Warragine Station, east of Marble Bar. This connection to Country and community remains central to the sisters' sense of responsibility. Today, two of the sisters have returned

as qualified physiotherapists, determined to shift the long-standing equation that sends Pilbara families away for care.

What they are building through

Universal Physiotherapy & Wellness is more than a clinic. It is a strategic intervention in a region where health outcomes are shaped as much by geography and culture as by clinical



Clockwise from main: Triplets Roberta, Lauren and Jacinta Ramirez-Smith with their mother, Sharon Ramirez; the Port Hedland clinic is a rural generalist practice with a wide range of treatments; Roberta with her university degree; Lauren on graduation day



need. Their model blends evidence-based physiotherapy with cultural safety, community trust and a mindset of preventative health that is rarely embedded in private practice.

Their pathway into physiotherapy began through sport. Both sisters competed in the WA Netball League and experienced serious injuries, including ACL ruptures that required surgery and rehabilitation.

"We were rehabbed by great physios and that's when the idea sort of popped in our head," they say. What began as an interest in sport and recovery evolved into something broader. University training exposed them to the full scope of physiotherapy, and with that came a recognition of its potential impact in

“
I wanted to
be a physio
to help our
people bring
cultural
safety into
healthcare

remote communities. Returning home shifted that understanding again. In the Pilbara, physiotherapists cannot specialise narrowly. They must operate as generalists, responding to a wide range of needs across a population that often has limited access to healthcare.

"We call ourselves rural physio generalists ... because of that lack of healthcare services," they say.

For Lauren, the decision to pursue physiotherapy was shaped not only by sport, but by what she observed growing up.

"Being Indigenous growing up in the Pilbara and actually first-hand seeing the lack of Indigenous support around healthcare, I wanted to be a physio to help our people bring that cultural safety and that cultural awareness into healthcare," she says.

Cultural safety is the operational core of their business. Many barriers Aboriginal patients face are relational, not clinical. Language differences, communication styles and unfamiliar environments can make appointments feel inaccessible. Cultural safety is a practical necessity.

"There's a big language barrier... so Aboriginal people when going to an appointment might not understand anything that's being said," Lauren says. It's a simple recognition that for many Aboriginal people, English is a second or a third spoken language.

Lauren also points to differences in communication styles, including eye contact, body language and avoidance issues, as factors that shape whether patients feel comfortable engaging with care.

The result is reflected in attendance patterns across the region. Missed appointments are common, but the reasons behind them are complex and often misunderstood.

In this context, representation becomes a form of access. The presence of Aboriginal practitioners changes the dynamic.

"Being an Aboriginal healthcare worker, you're naturally going to attract more of that Aboriginal population to see you because they're already going to feel culturally safe," Lauren says.

This is not incidental. It is central to the strategic purpose of the business.

"Our number one goal is to get our mob to get the preventative healthcare

that they need," she said. The clinic itself is modest in scale. Located in Port Hedland, it operates with two treatment rooms and is staffed by the sisters themselves. It has been open for just over two months and demand is already building, largely through word of mouth.

"In small towns, it is word of mouth ... that's probably the biggest way it gets around," they say.

Their service offering is broad: musculoskeletal physiotherapy, sports injury rehab, NDIS services, women's and men's health and pre-employment assessments. In a region like the Pilbara, this breadth is not optional.

Growth plans are already in motion. In the medium term, the sisters aim to expand the clinic, hire additional practitioners and establish a dedicated gym and Pilates space at the clinic.

"We have a big space at the back, and from there we want to open group-based exercise classes," the sisters say.

These plans are tied to a specific vision: creating environments where Aboriginal people feel comfortable participating in exercise and rehabilitation.

Longer term, the ambition extends beyond Port Hedland. The sisters are considering additional clinics across the Pilbara as part of a broader effort to improve access across the region.

Even in these early stages, structural challenges are clear. One stands out.

"It's getting transport for our Indigenous clients into clinic. That's a big one," the sisters say.

Without reliable transport, even the most culturally appropriate service can remain out of reach.

At 27, the Ramirez-Smith sisters are at the beginning of what is likely to be a long-term commitment to the region. They expect to remain in the Pilbara into the future, building both their business and its impact.

Their story reflects a move by Indigenous Australians from participation in the workforce to ownership of enterprise.

In Port Hedland, that shift is already visible. It's in a modest clinic with two treatment rooms, built by three sisters and guided by a clear sense of purpose.

To bring healthcare home. To make it culturally safe. And to ensure that the next generation of Pilbara families can access care without leaving Country. ●



Tourism toast for a top-notch operator

But Walter McGuire isn't the only OAM in the family, as **Dianne Bortolletto** reports

Less than 200 years ago, the shores of the Derbarl Yerrigan (Swan River, Perth) were lined with paperbarks. Today, towering skyscrapers sit over these bountiful ancient hunting grounds, and bitumen covers the tracks trodden by Whadjuk Noongar people for millennia. For a decade, Whadjuk Elder Walter McGuire has dedicated his life to uncovering these hidden landscapes, ensuring the first story of his Country is heard. Now, that dedication has been formally recognised on a national stage.

In the 2026 honours list, Walter McGuire was awarded the Order of Australia Medal in the General Division for his outstanding service to the tourism industry in Western Australia.

Like many grassroots leaders, the news of the accolade caught him completely off guard.

"I thought it was a hoax. What does Canberra want with little Walter McGuire?" he says, reflecting on the secretive nomination process.

"It was quite a shock. I missed a few calls, and then emails followed, and I thought, 'well this looks real'."

The OAM is a crowning achievement in a tourism career that began simply as a dream between a husband and wife. Approaching retirement, Walter and his wife of 38 years, Meg McGuire, a Kungarakan woman with traditional ties to Litchfield National Park in the Northern Territory, began brainstorming.

"We thought, 'why don't we get involved in tourism?'," he says.

"It's given us a vehicle to travel through this land and share our stories through our perspective."

On April 19, Go Cultural Aboriginal

Tours and Experiences marked its 10-year anniversary.

Walter is quick to clarify the chain of command between himself and his wife.

"She's the boss and I have to remember that every day!" he says.

Together, they dive into the historical archives, blending Meg's meticulous research skills from her former career as a librarian with the oral histories of Walter's old people.

"Our main purpose is telling the first story from our perspective and creating safe environments for everyone in community to ask questions. It doesn't



Whadjuk Elder Walter McGuire at a riverside smoking ceremony; McGuire as WAITOC chair. Photography: JayTurks

Rottnest Island was a site of colonisation and imprisonment, recording the highest number of Aboriginal deaths in custody in Australia. Nearly 4000 men and boys were incarcerated there.

"The Wadjemup story is a beautiful story, but the Rottnest Island story is not. It has many hidden truths that the broader community didn't know until recently, and many still don't know," says Walter.

On the final leg of his tours, he takes visitors to the island's mass burial site. He watches visitors realise the weight of the ground they are standing on.

"People have broken down emotionally, once they realise that they've camped on graves of men who never returned home," says Walter.

"I tell them it's not their fault, they didn't know, they are forgiven."

Beyond his own tours, Walter's leadership has helped shape the wider industry. He stepped down in November 2025 after six years as chair of the WA Indigenous Tourism Council. He is proud of the work WAITOC does, supporting Indigenous tour operators in WA. When it started, there were two staff, and now there are 15 across the state.

Go Cultural Tours earned an induction into the WA Tourism Awards Hall of Fame after three consecutive state gold medals; the first earned in 2018, after only two years in business. It has also won gold, silver and bronze medals at the National Tourism Awards.

As Walter prepares to be officially presented with his OAM medal at Government House in May, he remains focused on the bigger picture.

"I want to use it for the glory of our God and our creator, ask questions, listen and improve people's lives to make this a better country," he says.

"I'd like to acknowledge my parents and old people, and my wife. And all the old people we represent today that didn't have a voice."

Above all, the medal is a tribute to the resilience of the Whadjuk Noongar people.

In a moment of family pride, he wasn't the only McGuire named in the honours list. His younger brother Barry McGuire also received an OAM, for his services to the community.

"It was funny. We didn't know that each other was going to get an award until the list was published," says Walter. ●

matter what the question is, we won't be offended," Walter says. "We teach them some words and get them to speak in language, the language of the land.

"When you're sharing a story and you see people's eyes light up ... that's what I find most rewarding. You see people and a shift in them when they learn some knowledge. It's a beautiful thing."

But not all the stories are easy to tell. As a dedicated member of the Wadjemup Aboriginal Reference Group since 2017, Walter advises the Rottnest Island Authority and guides visitors through the island's dark history.



You see people's eyes light up ... that's what I find most rewarding





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Waikato River, source of plenty

Ngāruawāhia, Aotearoa — Thirty years after receiving a \$170 million settlement for the confiscation of its lands, Waikato-Tainui has built one of the most sophisticated Indigenous economic systems in the world.

Its asset base is more than \$2.4 billion. Its tribal population has grown to more than 96,000 members. And in its most recent planning cycle, the iwi has committed \$70 million over the next financial year towards reinvestment in its people, communities and future.

This transformation did not occur through scale alone. It is the result of a deliberately constructed system in which governance, capital, land and culture operate as one.

Governance: the foundation of control

At the centre of the Waikato-Tainui model is a governance structure designed for representation and execution. The tribal parliament, Te Whakakitenga o Waikato Inc, brings together representatives from across the iwi's marae (extended family

A Maori council has parlayed a settlement agreement into a business ecosystem that benefits all, Reece Harley reports

groupings connected to ancestral meeting grounds). Each community elects its members, creating a direct line between local authority and tribal decision-making.

Chair Tipa Mahuta describes it as a system built intentionally over three decades. "This version of tribal government has been here for 30 years," she says. "We decided our communities would be represented in this forum, and we delegate a lot of the day-to-day management to a subset of members."

That subset is Te Arataura, the executive body responsible for operational leadership, chaired by Tukoroirangi Morgan. A central figure in modern Māori economic leadership, Morgan has played a defining role in shaping Waikato-Tainui's post-settlement trajectory, driving the execution of strategy and ensuring that decisions made at the parliamentary level are translated into disciplined commercial action aligned with long-term intergenerational outcomes.

Alongside the management team, Te Arataura ensures that strategy agreed at the parliamentary level is implemented in practice. The iwi, through the Waikato Raupatu Lands Trust, is responsible for delivering social, economic, environmental and cultural initiatives that advance the wellbeing of people, lands and waters. The asset base, which is 100 per cent owned by the iwi for the benefit of tribal members, is deployed commercially through Tainui Group Holdings to generate sustainable returns that support these outcomes.

Governance sets direction. The commercial arm executes and generates a return. The iwi arm delivers social, economic, environmental and cultural initiatives that advance the wellbeing of the people. All are accountable to the same parliament and the community.

Land: the engine of the system

The economic model begins with land. Waikato-Tainui tends not to sell

whenua (land). It accumulates and develops it. For many tribal members, the idea of selling land for short-term gain runs counter to the purpose of the settlement itself.

At Ruakura, a former dairy farm has been transformed into a national logistics hub. The land has been rezoned, serviced and progressively developed into one of New Zealand's most significant inland ports and industrial precincts.

The model is consistent. Land is retained. Capital is introduced. Value is created through development.

A recent partnership with Brookfield Asset Management has accelerated this approach, enabling debt reduction of more than \$120 million while unlocking a long-term development pipeline across the Ruakura Superhub.

Brookfield contributes capital and global expertise. Waikato-Tainui contributes land and local control. Ownership remains with the iwi.

A portfolio built on whenua

What distinguishes Waikato-Tainui is not just the size of its asset base, but its 

The Indigenous Business Review



composition. Through Tainui Group Holdings, the iwi has assembled one of the most significant Indigenous-owned property and infrastructure portfolios in the southern hemisphere. Its holdings span major retail centres, logistics infrastructure, commercial office buildings, hotels, farmland and forestry, all anchored to land that remains in tribal ownership.

In retail, the iwi co-owns The Base, one of New Zealand's largest shopping centres, alongside Centre Place in the centre of Kirikiriroa (Hamilton). These are regional economic anchors, generating employment, foot traffic and long-term lease income.

Its commercial portfolio includes landmark office buildings and tenancies with major corporates, research institutions and government agencies, positioning the iwi at the centre of regional economic activity. In hospitality, investments such as the Te Arikiniui Pullman Auckland Airport Hotel and Novotel Auckland Airport connect the iwi directly into national tourism and infrastructure networks.

The industrial portfolio is centred on Ruakura Superhub, where inland port operations, rail connectivity and large-scale warehousing developments place Waikato-Tainui at the heart of New Zealand's freight and supply chain economy.

Beyond property, the iwi holds extensive agricultural and natural resource assets, including farming operations, forestry and fisheries. These are not only commercial investments but extensions of whenua-based stewardship, linking economic return with cultural continuity.

Taken together, these assets form an economic platform. A system of interlinked holdings designed to generate income, build capability and sustain long-term development

while protecting land and the environment.

Capital: disciplined, adaptive, long-term

From that land base, Waikato-Tainui has built a diversified portfolio in property, infrastructure, natural resources and global equities.

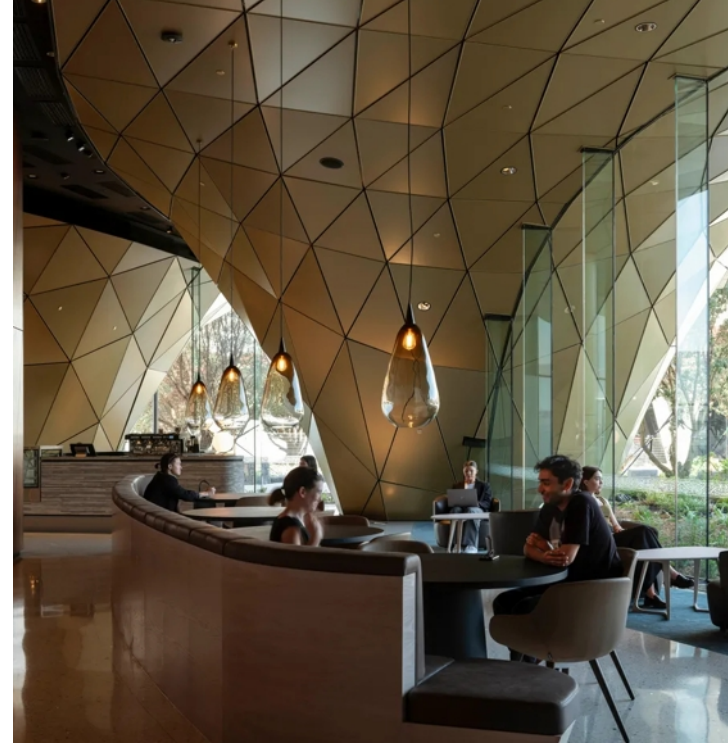
The asset value is about \$2.4 billion. Each year, capital is both distributed and reinvested. More than \$36 million was distributed in FY25, alongside more than \$30 million directed into grants, programs and strategic initiatives.

The model is designed to balance present and future needs.

The latest half-year results show the system in transition. Returns from global equities remain strong, while the domestic property portfolio has been affected by interest rates and market conditions. Waikato-Tainui is now managing economic cycles, not simply growth. Its strategy is evolving accordingly, with a focus on diversification, stronger cash yields and reduced reliance on debt.

An internal economy

One of the most distinctive features of the Waikato-Tainui model is its deliberate construction of an internal



Waikato Tainui CEO Donna Flavell; Te Arataura; members; Ruakura inland port; Te Arikini Pullman Hotel; the Pullman; the ACC Building;



economy. Through their business support initiative Puna Pakihi, the iwi has built a network of nearly 400 tribal businesses. These businesses are integrated into major developments.

On the recent Ruakura project, at least 25 per cent of contract value was directed to iwi-affiliated businesses, generating more than \$1 million in work across multiple sectors.

Capital generated from iwi assets is reinvested into iwi businesses, which in turn create jobs and capability within the community.

Assets to outcomes

The Waikato-Tainui model is designed to convert economic strength into social outcomes.

Education, health, housing and cultural programs are funded directly from the economic base.

Their Tribal Parliament recently approved a 2026-27 financial year allocations of \$70 million reinvested into community initiatives, grants and support. This reflects a change in focus. The next phase is not just growth. It is delivery. This is most visible in the tribe's ambitions for housing. At Hopuhopu, the iwi is developing a large-scale precinct combining housing, enterprise and community infrastructure. Stage

one includes 57 new homes, alongside transitional housing already secured for tribal members. The homes will be long-term affordable rentals and the properties will remain in tribal ownership. Housing is now central to the long-term strategy. The focus is moving from building wealth to deploying it towards community benefit.

Environment and authority

Waikato-Tainui's economic model is underpinned not only by ownership, but by authority.

Through the Waikato River settlement, formalised in legislation in 2010, the iwi holds a direct and enduring role in governance over the river and its catchment. Decision-making power is shared across local and central government, with Waikato-Tainui embedded in the system.

At the centre of this framework is Te Ture Whaimana o Te Awa o Waikato, the vision and strategy for the river. It carries legal weight, shaping planning decisions across multiple layers of government. Its objective is the restoration and protection of the river's health as the primary outcome of settlement.

"Our people don't believe you can carve up our awa. It's all or nothing,"

Waikato-Tainui chief executive Donna Flavell says. "Our river is a tupuna — our ancestor — a living being."

The Waikato River is also one of New Zealand's most heavily utilised economic corridors. It underpins dairy production, electricity generation and urban water supply. Major industrial users operate along its length, drawing from and discharging back into the system.

"That relationship is always a balance," Flavell says. "These are big users. They take water, and they discharge contaminated water back into it."

Where economic development once occurred without regard to cumulative impact, the current framework requires that environmental health be central to decision-making. Wastewater discharge, agricultural run-off and infrastructure design are now assessed not only through regulatory compliance, but through cultural obligation.

"Ultimately, the river is the beneficiary of the settlement," Flavell says.

This has practical consequences. Restoration programs now operate at scale. Millions of native plants have been established along riverbanks, wetlands have been reconstructed and species management programs are under way. In some cases, iwi members physically intervene in ecological systems,

transferring tuna (eel) populations around hydroelectric dams to sustain species and cultural practice.

The result is a system where economy and environment are not competing domains, but interdependent ones. For Waikato-Tainui, the river is not separate from the economy.

Centre of growth

With scale comes influence.

Waikato-Tainui is now one of the largest economic actors in its region and the single largest ratepayer in Hamilton. Its holdings and developments position it at the centre of regional growth and decision-making. Economic scale provides leverage. Leverage shapes outcomes.

Waikato-Tainui offers a clear demonstration of what can be built from a settlement. It has retained control of its land; it has aligned governance with commercial execution; and it has built an internal economy that circulates capital through its own people.

Tipa Mahuta sees this as part of a broader Indigenous exchange.

"We're a tribe that has always been outward looking," he says. "Today, tribe to tribe, we can stand in front of each other and ask what opportunities we can build together." ●



When Johnathan Thurston speaks about employment, he draws on his own experience on starting a job.

At 18, working behind a deli counter at Coles, he developed core skills such as reliability, communication and confidence. That experience now informs a partnership between Coles and the Johnathan Thurston Academy, focused on preparing First Nations students for employment and long-term economic participation.

The program will be delivered during term two at Trinity Bay High School in Cairns for students aged 15 to 18. Through two components, JTBelieve and JTSucceed, students progress from leadership development into practical job readiness, including resume-writing, interview preparation, teamwork and goal-setting.

These are foundational skills, but they are often where young people disengage

from the employment process. Without confidence in applying for jobs and navigating interviews, many do not progress into work.

"Coles gave me my first start in the workforce," Thurston says. "If this program helps young people believe in themselves and transition into employment, then we've done something worthwhile."

Trinity Bay High School executive

principal Geoff Moore said.

"Programs like this help address the barriers and challenges some students experience when applying or interviewing for jobs and provide opportunities for them to gain employment and experience success. "33.4 per cent of our students identify as First Nations and for those students, having a role model like JT, someone who is connected through culture and

understands where they come from, can be life-changing to see that anything is possible."

The program is structured to move students into employment. Participants build capability through regular sessions, and graduates can then apply for roles at Coles, supported through the recruitment process.

This direct link between training and employment is central. Many initiatives

JT's helping hand for career-starters

The ex-Coles worker is backing high-schoolers, Reece Harley reports



focus on skills without creating pathways into jobs. This model connects both.

Coles reports that 3.6 per cent of its workforce identifies as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander and that it works with more than 80 Indigenous businesses across its supply chain. The partnership aligns with a broader strategy to increase Indigenous participation in employment and procurement.

Coles head of Indigenous affairs Sara Stuart says the focus is on economic independence.

"We both understand how powerful that first job can be," she says. "It's often the first step toward independence and financial security."

The challenge across Indigenous employment is not only access to jobs, but preparation for them. Training without employment pathways has limited impact, while employment without preparation affects retention.



Having a role model like JT can be life-changing

Programs that combine both elements are more likely to deliver sustained outcomes.

Success will be measured by whether students secure employment, remain in the workforce and build careers over time. That is where economic empowerment is realised. ●



Clockwise from main: Rugby league legend Johnathan Thurston back in the Coles deli where he landed his first job; speaking to students at Trinity Bay High School; Sara Stuart of Coles with Thurston and students; Thurston has a one-on-one with a student





Building bridges of the economic kind

Beating its first deadline was a good sign for this company, **Giovanni Torre** reports

Fred Taylor has been building Indigenous Mining and Civil Australia Pty Ltd (IMACA) for more than six years on the foundations of civil

construction knowledge, capability and experience.

Taylor has 30 years of experience in construction. Alongside Liam McKinney, he founded IMACA to realise a vision of building a culturally aware workforce that provides long-term employment for Indigenous people.

IMACA is a majority Aboriginal-owned company that integrates five decades of civil construction experience, delivering concrete, drainage and earthworks projects throughout the state, with a commitment to creating a sustainable and prosperous Indigenous business sector in Western Australia.

A vital turning point for the emerging company was an important joint venture contract working on reconstruction after floods devastated the Fitzroy Valley and wider Kimberley in late 2022 and early 2023.

Taylor told The Indigenous Business Review that this important work set IMACA "off and running".

IMACA played a vital role in building the new bridge across the Martuwarra / Fitzroy River, reconnecting Fitzroy Crossing and surrounding communities to the west by road.

It was IMACA's first project and it completed the work six months ahead of program, setting the tone for a workplace culture strongly focused on diligence and dedication.

"We have come a long way," Taylor says.

IMACA is now B1 tier with Main Roads, opening up a range of important opportunities.

"We are building our way up - B1, B2, B3 - we'd want to be sitting there at B3, directly building ourselves for the client. We'll get there," he says.

IMACA strives to hit a target of 10 per cent Indigenous employment on every job it takes on.

Navin (**confirming full name and role in the company shortly**) says the company takes a strong stance on worksite health and safety, including the issue of drugs and alcohol and it defines success as "pricing the work right and completing the work without doing any rework, and delivering customer satisfaction". It says this is why IMACA



Clockwise from far left: Fred Taylor; IMACA team members; IMACA at a bridge project; installing retaining walls at Armadale; IMACA personnel at Armadale

gets called back for more jobs from established clients.

Civil construction services provider Calroc is a shareholder of IMACA. Specialising in project management, formwork, reinforcement and concrete, the organisation has built a reputation for delivering high-quality projects throughout Western Australia.

Together, the two companies combine their engineering approach and industry knowledge, working collaboratively to bring employment opportunities to Indigenous people while delivering

quality civil construction projects for their clients.

Taylor says as IMACA expands, it will be in a position to take on more Indigenous school-leavers and train them in key skills for the sector.

"I think as we grow and we win major jobs by ourselves, we can - down in Byford (south-east of Perth), where we build all the precast stuff to put on site - that's a great opportunity for young Aboriginal people to come through and build their way up," he says.

"It's hard work, you know, but the

opportunities are there if young people want to come and work for us."

Taylor says the most rewarding thing about building IMACA has been seeing communities energised by employment opportunities.

"When we first got Fitzroy and did that, the whole Fitzroy Crossing community was working, and not on [community development program] money. They were employed by all the contractors that were there as part of that bridge," he says.

"There were more than 10 different

contractors in the town, probably 15, and I would see the Traditional Owners of Fitzroy, all the mob, dressed up in their PPE gear early in the morning, going to work, going home, or the ones that were in the camp where I stayed.

"It was the whole town. It was a great story, a great outcome to see everyone earning a good wage and fixing their own town.

"And then they did Brooking Channel. That was the next thing."

Taylor says the opportunities also build hope and optimism in communities.

"It's about hope - knowing there's more work coming. And I noticed there were a few Aboriginal contractors, not just ourselves; there were local contractors around the district, around the area on that East Kimberley site, doing things.

"It's about the economy. It's about our people being involved in that, getting a piece of the wealth of major construction jobs."

Taylor says IMACA is now pursuing work in South Australia.

With the company looking to expand around the country, Navin (**confirming details shortly**) says NSW benefits from having a statewide Indigenous Chamber of Commerce promoting Aboriginal-owned businesses.

Taylor says: "It doesn't happen overnight. It takes time to build the foundation and a good name."

Taylor encourages aspiring and emerging Indigenous businesspeople to follow their hearts.

"Look at what you're passionate about, and ask 'is it going to help the wider community?'," he says.

"And you've got to pick a good name that's catchy. Tell your story; it's something that's really strong in your business.

"Take it easy. Slowly. Start, build up." ●

The Indigenous Business Review



Winyama co-founder Andrew Dowding; Dowding with staff members Franzi Ohly-Smith, River Bali, Kass Boladeras and Kat Stapley-Oh, right

First Nations entrepreneur Andrew Dowding said his company's shift from a joint venture to full Indigenous ownership was more than just symbolic: it was about prioritising mob.

The proud Ngarluma man, co-founder of the leading geospatial and cloud consultancy firm Winyama, says the business's recent move to full autonomy has been one of the company's biggest milestones since its establishment in 2019.

"We started as a joint venture, which made sense at the time; we needed the backing, but the transition to 100 per cent Aboriginal ownership in February this year was the fulfilment of what the business was always supposed to be," he tells the Indigenous Business Review. "The direction of this business is set entirely by Aboriginal people. That matters practically, not just symbolically."

The Perth-based company is one of only a handful of Indigenous-owned businesses in Australia that offer services including cultural mapping, heritage mapping, IT consulting, geospatial consulting and free mapping training (through its social initiative, the Indigenous Mapping Workshop Australia).

Dowding says one of the motivations for starting the business was that much of the data that First Nations organisations were trying to access was held by government agencies or mining companies. In some cases, the data was nowhere to be found.

"I could see that Indigenous organisations were being asked to make decisions about their Country, across heritage, land management, native title, yet external parties held the data they needed," he says. "That's a sovereignty problem dressed up as a technical problem. And sometimes that data simply didn't exist yet, because the work to properly survey Country hadn't been done. The inspiration was straightforward. Fix that."

The managing director of Winyama says it was critically important to empower Indigenous communities to participate in the digital economy.

He says one of the business's founding purposes was to equip First Nations people with the skills and tools to gain sovereignty over their data and intellectual property.



Charting a course on way to full autonomy

Knowledge is power when it comes to decisions on land use, **Brendan Foster reports**

Dowding says that while the use of digital tools is growing in the Indigenous community, technological barriers still exist. That's a gap he is aiming to close, one map at a time.

Since the company opened more than eight years ago, it has trained more than 1300 Indigenous people across 84 organisations in geospatial mapping.

"Maps are how communities protect Country, respond to government and miners and make decisions for the next generation," he says. "Maps are a means for communities to advocate for their rights and interests and rebalance a previously imbalanced decision-making process."

On the surface, Minyama's success and journey to becoming a genuinely self-determined Indigenous enterprise appears to be smooth sailing. In 2023, the Western Australian company picked up two gongs at the Telstra Business

Awards: Business of the Year and the Indigenous Excellence category award.

But Dowding says the company, which has a presence in the Pilbara, the Kimberley, the Mid West and the South West regions, faced several hurdles when it started.

"The commercial credibility gap is real when you're a small, new, Indigenous-owned firm going up against established consultancies," he says.

"Over time we've built out technically complex spatial projects for our community and for mining and government clients. Proving ourselves in these projects, and others like it, helped us build our reputation for delivering high-quality work."

Dowding says Winyama plans to expand into new and innovative territory. It will continue serving the public and private sectors, but First Nations organisations remain its focus.



Maps are how communities protect Country

"We're in a real research and development phase, looking to build services that better support our [Prescribed Bodies Corporate] and ranger teams," he says.

"We're looking into Earth Observation for Healthy Country, the role of spatial for native title compensation claims and what sort of [Geographic information

system] support service we could provide to organisations who are still building out their own capability."

The son of former West Australian premier Peter Dowding says there is little he would change about his business journey so far.

Except one: He wished Winyama had moved to Aboriginal ownership sooner.

"The joint venture was the right structure to get started, but the moment we had the reference clients and the technical credibility to stand on our own, we should have accelerated that transition," he says.

He has some left-of-field advice for any young First Nations people wanting to start up a company: don't start with a business model. Start with the problem.

"Find the problem that needs solving in your community and build toward that," he says. "And don't wait until you feel ready." ●



*R.M.
Williams*

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