



JUST IN TIME

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Keeping their homelands

Aboriginal spirituality and culture are intrinsically linked to the land and country where Aboriginal people live.

What are homelands?

Homelands were established by Aboriginal communities to allow Aboriginal people to maintain an on-going connection with their culture while living in their country. In the Northern Territory around one third of Aboriginal people live on homelands. Homelands are vital for the positive mental and physical health of Aboriginal people allowing them to be close to sacred sites and connect to their ancestral history.

Throughout the 20th century successive Australian governments attempted to assimilate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people into colonised Australian communities. This policy meant that Aboriginal families were torn apart and many began to lose their connection to their land, culture and languages.

In the 1960s and 1970s small groups of Aboriginal people left their larger communities and returned to their traditional lands. The Aboriginal Land Rights Act 1976 (Northern Territory) was the ground-breaking legislation that allowed for the return of large areas of Aboriginal land to the traditional owners in the Territory and for Aboriginal people to begin to reconnect with their identity.

Following on from this landmark legislation many more Aboriginal people returned to their homelands and successfully gained government support to ensure the provision of legitimate rights to sanitation, education, housing and electricity. Amnesty International Australia describes the development of Aboriginal homelands, not as a rejection of modernity, but as an attempt to embrace the benefits of citizenship on their own terms, within their own value system.

What are the benefits of Aboriginal people living on their homelands?

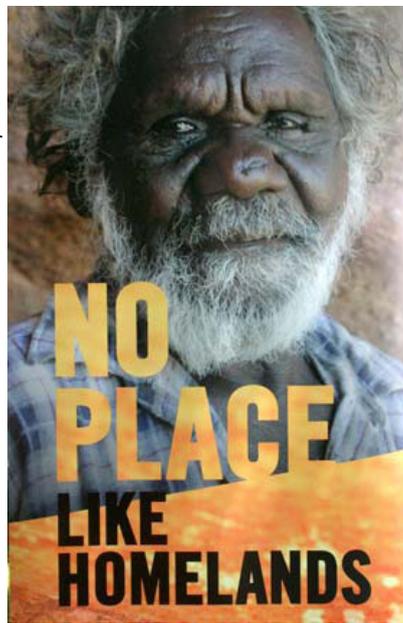
The United Nations Special Rapporteur on Indigenous Rights said:

"Homelands are widely understood to have lower levels of social problems, such as domestic violence and substance abuse, than more populated communities. According to reports, the health of Indigenous people living on homelands is significantly better than of those living in larger communities. Homelands are also used effectively as part of substance abuse and other programmes for at-risk Aboriginal youth living in more populated or urban centres."

Apart from health, cultural and social benefits, homelands have increased the economic benefits to both the Aboriginal community and the local community through eco tourism, Indigenous art and natural resource management. Homelands also provide employment opportunities for Aboriginal people. In the Northern Territory the homelands have become a key part of the Territory's tourism industry, providing \$775.78 million (5.8%) to the local economy.

Homelands benefit the environment as Aboriginal people take great care in protecting and caring for the land. The local community benefits as Aboriginal people are more likely to make community based decisions about matters that affect them. Homelands give Aboriginal people the power to make their own choices, a power, which has been taken away from them for many generations.

Supporting Aboriginal people to live on their homelands provides positive flow-on effects throughout other areas of society. With lower crime rates and lower instances of health-related problems there is less economic pressure on the justice and health systems. Providing employment opportunities on their own terms enables Aboriginal people to contribute to the economy and community. Homelands in short facilities both beneficial outcomes for the community and for greater collaboration with all levels of government.



Government closure of homelands

In 2014 the Australian Federal Government announced that it would cease funding Municipal and Essential Services (MUNS) to remote Aboriginal communities. As a result of this proposed reduction the Western Australian government announced that up to 150 Aboriginal communities will have services cut due to the lack of federal funding.

Currently 12,113 people live in 247 remote communities in Western Australia. The Prime Minister has supported the Western Australian government's decision saying "What we can't do is endlessly subsidise lifestyle choices, if those lifestyle choices are not conducive to the kind of full participation in Australian society that everyone should have." Prime Minister Abbott received considerable criticism from Aboriginal leaders as well as other politicians for his comments.

Aboriginal leader and Chair of the Prime Minister's Indigenous Advisory Council, Warren Mundine, expressed his concern on the ABC's Radio National program "These people are actually living on their homelands and it affects a lot of things, it affects their cultural activities, it affects their native title, it affects a number of areas."

"It's not as simple as ... if someone from Sydney decides to have a tree change and go and live in the bush. It's about their life, it's about their very essence, it's about their very culture," said Mr Mundine.

Many non-Aboriginal Australians have joined with Aboriginal people in opposing the closure of Aboriginal homelands. Thousands of people across the country have signed petitions, written to their MPs and joined peaceful rallies saying NO to the closure.

The Facts

While progress has been made in recent times, harsh policies and a lack of understanding of Aboriginal culture continue to widen the health, social and education gap between Aboriginal people and non-Aboriginal people. A few statistics paint a picture of the current state of Aboriginal people in Australia.

On average Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people will die 10-17 years earlier than other Australians.

- Babies born to Aboriginal mothers die at more than twice the rate of other Australian babies.
- Indigenous Australian adults today are 6 times more likely to be blind than non-Indigenous Australian adults and 12 times more likely to be blind from cataracts.
- Aboriginal people are incarcerated at rates 14 times higher than the non-Aboriginal rate and are 7.9 times more likely to be taken into police custody.
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people represent 3% of the overall Australian population but 28% of prison population.
- Mortality rates for Indigenous Australians are on a par with some of the world's most impoverished nations.

Amnesty International Australia has strongly condemned the closure of homeland communities.

Tammy Solonec, Amnesty International Australia's Indigenous Peoples Rights Manager, argued in the Sydney Morning Herald "evicting people from their homelands and denying them the right to practice their culture would be a breach of Australia's international human rights obligations."

With proper services such as health, education, water and shelter, people can, according to Amnesty International, be healthier and live longer on the homelands.

GET INVOLVED!

Time is of the essence as funding is due to stop in July 2015.

- Sign the petition www.change.org/p/colin-barnett-stop-the-closure-of-the-homelands-state-and-federal-governments-must-fund-services-in-remote-aboriginal-communities
- Write to your local member and express your concerns about the closure of Aboriginal communities.
- Pray for our leaders' work with Aboriginal people to create sustainable communities on their homelands.

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