

[Land Rights News, Vol. 2, No. 4, September 1987]

Why we are doing it our way  
by Mick Dodson

Why do Aboriginal people want to live on outstations? What do they get out of it?

Contrary to the opinions expressed so forcefully by NT Treasurer, Barry Coulter, it's certainly not to go on holiday.

Outstations are in fact a recognition by Aboriginal people that enforced settlement in artificial communities is against their interests.

During this century, people have been driven off their ancestral lands and herded together into communities which were supposed to prepare them for assimilation. What they did was create dependency - on an unfamiliar diet, on handouts and on a generally parasitic way of life.

The settlements created disease and social problems. They helped create malnutrition, trachoma, tuberculosis and other diseases as major problems for Aboriginal people, they broken down traditional links, interfered with ceremonial and other responsibilities and generally robbed people of the basic human dignity all people deserve.

There was no preparation for Aboriginal people standing on their own feet. Aboriginal people had no say in policy. They were not consulted about the aims of the settlements and, until recently, had little say in the government of settlements.

The outstations are a reaction against this artificial way of life. Certainly they have restored pride to Aboriginal people and encouraged a return to caring for the country.

But they also offer the chance of self-determination in a modern sense. Many of the outstations communities, once they have established basic housing and water supplies, are in an ideal position to generate some income through whatever economic activity is appropriate to them.

At Mount Catt, near Bulman, for instance, the community is set to start a major buffalo domestication program. They have built some of their own houses of local rock and they have paddocks and yards fenced and ready to go. With a normal population of about 20 people, however, they will face problems continuing if the only service the NT Government will provide them is water.

Contrast this with the support given to industries with minimal chances of success through the trade development zone - one of the Territory's major white elephants. Contrast this with the millions of dollars poured into hotels and casinos, in vain expectation of creating an eldorado out of tourism.

What the outstations are doing is creating vital economic opportunities for Aboriginal people, who are after all the Territory's most permanent residents. The small amount which has been spent in the past can be seen as "start-up" money, priming the pump until such time as it can run on its own.

The paltry \$2.7 million the NT Government has been spending on small communities represents incredible value for money. By supporting outstations, the government can reduce its outlay in other areas. Outstation and excision community people are healthier and more stable, they have less crime and far fewer social problems than the towns and settlements.

Encouraging outstations to the extent of increasing funding should have the nett effect of reducing outlays elsewhere. So all Territorians, not just Aboriginal

communities, benefit. Sounds logical, doesn't it? Ulterior motives aside, perhaps that's why the NT Administration can't see it.