

Sustaining Ngunnawal Culture Strategy

INTRODUCTION

The *Sustaining Ngunnawal Culture* strategy is an ongoing community development approach that works with the 'grass roots' community in the Canberra area. It is important to understand that this is a new approach that was not expected to be smooth, because of the traumatic life experiences of Elders. From the time of colonisation, Aboriginal people have been perceived by the dominant society as a 'problem'. Sadly, with racism and with the destruction of our culture that used to sustain and guide us, many of us are lost and act out that very image. It could be said that we are socially imploding, with an extremely high death rate, drug and alcohol problems, physical and mental health issues, violence, child sexual abuse - the list just goes on and on.

Now is the time to offer a new vision for local Aboriginal people based on cultural integrity and coming together. To achieve this it is vital to work with the core traditional family groups of the Ngunnawal people. It must be understood that only a long-term commitment will achieve the desired result.

The local Indigenous population of the ACT and region is diverse and numbers approximately 5,000 people, including Aboriginal people from other areas and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Many come to Canberra because of work in government organisations.

We, the Ngunnawal community, are a defined group within this. We are the traditional owners of the area, and are located in various communities both in and around the ACT. This includes such places as Queanbeyan, Yass, Goulburn, Brungle, and Tumut. These are towns in the region surrounding Canberra and are actually in NSW.

If one should endeavour to delve deeper into the social structure of the region, the Ngunnawal community can be seen as the grass roots of both Indigenous and non-Indigenous people living here. As with other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, we are also made up of several family groups. This is important to understand and acknowledge, for our identity is a collective identity.

With this in mind, The *Sustaining Ngunnawal Culture Strategy* has been developed on the understanding that changes for the local Indigenous population as a whole, depends on the reconciliation and collaboration of the grass-roots community. The Strategy takes into consideration that, to ensure we provide a sound structure for a new way of life for local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, we needed to start capacity building workshops for the Elders of each of the Ngunnawal families.

The project offers educational workshops in an ongoing series of camps for Elders. Feedback is provided to the funding bodies through monitoring and independent evaluation.

By February 2007 we had held twelve Ngunnawal Elders' camps, each lasting 3 to 4 days. These have been held in quiet bush settings that provide Elders with

the opportunity to have time out, share life stories, learn from each other, and find solutions to community concerns. The level at which the workshops are conducted is exploratory and personal, and gives each Elder the opportunity to express their individual point of view in a supportive community environment.

This strategy seeks to encourage the development of personal skills required for maintaining physical, social, spiritual, emotional and mental health. During the workshops, families work as a team to provide solutions to the questions put to them. The responses are written and then presented to the wider group.

In the lead up to this strategy the Elders were invited by the ACT Government to come to a Ngunnawal forum in Canberra, to resolve issues surrounding the signage to entry points to the ACT.

AIMS

The *Sustaining Ngunnawal Culture* strategy seeks reconciliation amongst the traditional owners in Ngunnawal country. For too long we only came together for funerals. But now, cultural camps for Ngunnawal Elders provide opportunities to:

- strengthen Ngunnawal culture and community by bringing Elders together to share cultural knowledge and ways;
- support Ngunnawal Elders to strengthen their capacity for leadership; and
- encourage stronger links between Ngunnawal Elders and their community.

LINKAGES

This Community Development initiative is supported by the *United Ngunnawal Elders' Council*, and *Journey of Healing ACT*.

United Ngunnawal Elders' Council (UNEC)

This Council was formed to bring together Elders from each of the Ngunnawal families in order to unite and work together towards common goals. The aim is to build skills and capacity for leadership, and to empower Elders as role models for the younger generations.

Journey of Healing ACT

This non-profit community group started as the *Canberra Sorry Day Network*, and continues to offer support to the Indigenous community wherever possible. Amongst other projects, JoHACT acts as Secretariat for the Strategy outlined here; this means it prepares funding submissions, manages and acquits the grants, organises the practical side of the Elders' camps, prepares reports for participants and funding bodies. The Secretariat and the Ngunnawal Project Officer are both members of JoHACT, and were appointed as the project sub-committee which reports to the Management Committee.

Indigenous organisations which contribute to the project include: *Gugan Gulwan Aboriginal Youth Service*, *Yurauna Centre* at the Canberra Institute of Technology (TAFE), and *Winnunga Nimmityjah Aboriginal Health Service*.

Getting going

- Grant submission to Canberra Community Foundation for 2 camps – given funds for 1.5 camps.
- JoH Committee agreed to sponsor the camps and approved a sub-committee to manage and organise them.
- Lots of planning, discussions, meetings.
- Met Kerry Arabena – agreed to facilitate.
- Lots more planning, discussions, meetings.
- Chris Higginson agreed to participate.
- Support from Senior Ngunnawal Elder - Agnes Shea

So began our first camp. Lots of nerves. Even more hope.

The theme of the first camp in 2003 was: *Unity, How do we get over the barriers to Unity?*

Facilitator was Kerry Arabena

(Funded by the Canberra Community Foundation)

The Elders were asked 'are you prepared to attend a series of educational camps to work together to find solutions to the many social problems we are experiencing?'

Elders agreed and suggestions to ensure unity included:

- Coming together more often
- Listening to each other without ridicule
- Respecting each other; and
- Helping each other

After the camp workshops it was found that the Elders were all saying similar things about wanting to work together, passing on culture to the next generations, and looking after their young people.

Strong messages came from the workshop discussions, including:

- the need for respect for Elders,
- an urgent need to help the young people,
- the advantages of working together to get things done, and
- the need for a stronger Aboriginal identity and pride.

Cultural identity was seen as an important strength to pass on to the next generations. Kerry and Chris took the words from the workshop reports, and put them together into a [charter](#) or statement. When it was read out, everyone agreed that this was what they wanted.

One Elder, who was related to most of the families, had prepared a wonderful [banner](#) showing the long 'journey of healing' that had begun, and the first meeting place that was this camp. There were feet walking away from the journey, but also feet walking towards it and joining in.

The Elder also prepared eight blank message sticks, taking wood from the same branch of the same tree found growing near the camp. This was seen as a symbol of the families coming from the Aboriginal tree of life. It was agreed that all branches need to be cared for as we share the same roots.

By 'signing' the banner with handprints, everyone committed themselves to the group charter (see over). This was seen as the first step on a 'journey of healing' for everyone there. Those present expressed a hope that other families would join them over time.

After reaching consensus on how to overcome barriers, a [charter](#) was developed from the solutions provided.

The theme of the second Camp was: *What is an Elder?*

(Funded by Canberra Community Foundation, & National Ecumenical Council)
Facilitator: Associate Professor Tracey Bunda

The workshops involved discussion and input into:

1. What are the responsibilities of an Elder, in both a traditional and contemporary context.
2. What is expected of an individual, if one should claim the status of an Elder? What does a true Elder do exactly, to earn the right to be acknowledged by their family and community as a leader?

This generated much debate and answers included:

- An Elder needs to keep a healthy connection with community
- A true Elder shows compassion and respect
- A respected Elder does not get carried away with their own importance

The theme of the third Camp was: *Addressing alcohol (and drug) issues in the community.*

(Funded by the Alcohol Education & Rehabilitation Foundation)
Facilitator: Kerry Arabena

Discussion was held about traditional lifestyles, when there was no alcohol and widespread drug consumption.

Elders also shared knowledge on the effects of alcohol and drugs on Indigenous communities today and how we can find solutions by working together.

Ideas were shared about what the Elders and other members of the community can do to support people trying to overcome addiction

These included:

- show care, love and support,
- help friends and family members to find alternative activities to alcohol and drugs
- alcohol/drug-free celebrations
- an Indigenous detox centre,

- better communication with services, more cross-cultural training within government

Overall the unanimous consensus was that we desperately need a Rehabilitation/Education Farm, catered to provide the appropriate services for all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, living in the area, who are having problems with substance misuse.

The fourth Camp focused on *Ngunnawal* life stories.

(Funded by ACT Heritage)

Dave Johnston, of Australian Archaeological Survey Consultants Pty Ltd. was facilitator for the camp. Dave is an Indigenous archaeologist and heritage researcher, and works extensively with communities around Australia on Indigenous archaeological and heritage projects. He has worked with many of the Ngunnawal families in the ACT and surrounding area.

Dave talked about traditional story telling, and the way in which the stories passed on knowledge and taught the young ones. He showed that sharing stories was a way of strengthening culture and teaching the next generations. It was agreed that it was important to record memories and information for the future generations.

Dave gave a number of examples of how people had recorded their stories recently, and how he had been helping a mob up north to do this.

After lunch the first session was delayed, so there was discussion about what people wanted in future camps.

Suggestions included:

- ✘ more bingo (this was a popular one);
- ✘ a talent quest – kareoke night;
- ✘ trivia night on Koori knowledge;
- ✘ bushwalking and bush tucker;
- ✘ sporting activities – Indigenous sports/games;
- ✘ visit Aboriginal sites and tribal areas;
- ✘ learn more and go forward;
- ✘ painting – oral history;
- ✘ identifying Aboriginal sites and artifacts;
- ✘ learn how to make traditional tools;
- ✘ art and craft work, basket weaving;
- ✘ learn language;
- ✘ Ngunnawal history, heritage, culture;
- ✘ Men’s business and women’s business;
- ✘ learn more about being an Elder – eg responsibilities; and
- ✘ learn more about budgets.

Then Dave continued to talk about traditional life, and the importance of knowing where the Ngunnawal sites are, so that they can be looked after.

Elders were given the opportunity to share some of their life stories through video recordings.

Families assembled together and actively engaged in reminiscing, about stories from their childhood, including life on missions, reserves and fringe-dweller existence.

The fifth Camp concentrated on: *Elders coming together*

(Funded by Canberra Community Foundation)

Facilitated by Kerrie Arabena, there was discussion of oppression, and the effects it can have on an individual, their family and community. We also explored the cognitive development of children and the impact our behaviour has on them as they are growing up.

Solutions included:

- Alcohol and drug free family social activities
- Strengthening husband and wife Relationships
- Anger management
- Awareness of negative and positive role models for children
- Parents attending more school and family events.

The theme of the sixth Camp was: *Working together to help the community*

(Funded by Healthpact ACT)

On the first day, Elders were trained in first aid by officials from St John Ambulance. At first we were a bit shy and nervous about working with the annie models to practice resuscitation. Fortunately as the workshop progressed interest grew and everyone participated enthusiastically. I am proud to say that 24 Elders went back to the community with skills and knowledge to pass on to family members.

By the end of the afternoon, everyone had a greater understanding of applying first aid, specifically in the areas of heart, substances, stroke, diabetes, epileptic fits, pressure bandages, snake bite, burns, CPR, and DRABC (Danger, Response, Airway, Breathing, Circulation). Everyone present was presented with a First Aid Certificate and were given a family-size first aid kit to take home.

On the second day we explored 'healing through art', and Elders tried a variety of art and craft methods including painting, leatherwork and necklaces.

The seventh Camp concentrated on *Consultation on a proposed Indigenous managed Healing/Rehabilitation Farm*

(Funded by ACT Health)

For some years, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities in the ACT and region had been talking about the need for a bush healing farm that is

culturally based. The ACT Government eventually funded a feasibility study on the *Healing Farm* proposal. As part of this feasibility study, ACT Health funded a consultation camp for Ngunnawal Elders.

This particular camp was held to ascertain the level of support in the Ngunnawal community for a Healing/Rehabilitation Farm, and what role Ngunnawal Elders might have in the governance and management of this important venture.

Ideas included:

- inclusion of other Indigenous people in the ACT and Region;
- types of programs needed;
- working with young people and their families;
- re-connecting with land;strengthening the cultural base;
- caring for land'
- bush tucker garden;
- education, training and life skills;
- linking with other organisations and services; and
- setting up businesses to generate income.

The eighth Camp focused on: *Ngunnawal Histories*

(Funded by ACT Heritage)

The aim of this camp was to record individual stories by Elders that would be published in a book to be made available for schools and other members of the public.

The reasons for recording Elders' stories were discussed, and there was general agreement that it was a useful project that would benefit future generations.

After the camp we followed up Elders who agreed to record their stories, as well as all members and alternates then sitting on the United Ngunnawal Elders' Council. Finally there were seven stories which were published in 2007.

The theme of the ninth Camp was *Ngunnawal Histories part 2*

(Funded by Community Programs Partnership with ACT Parks & Conservation, and Healthpact ACT)

The ninth camp followed on from the last one. Elders listened to three of the draft life stories as the facilitator read them out. Some of the events in people's lives brought on much laughter, and at times there was sadness and other emotions. This sharing inspired others to volunteer their stories, and these were followed up later.

Also at this camp a document was introduced from a diary written in 1831 a surveyor who had an emphatic stance towards local Aboriginal people. He described in detail a ceremony that he and his peers were permitted to watch. You could hear a pin drop when this was read at the camp.

The tenth Camp dealt with *Strengthening Relationships*

(Funded by Healthpact ACT and Queanbeyan ATSI Regional Council)

This camp responded to requests from Elders for anger management. Kerry Arabena facilitated discussions about emotions and how they affect the individual and the people around them, and strategies to strengthen relationships.

The eleventh Camp focused on *Developing our Community*

(Funded by Chief Minister's Department)

Facilitators were Satch Campbell and Paul Adcock, from the Community Development Unit at Canberra Institute of Technology. The Elders shared information about positive things they had helped to achieve in their own communities, and the proposed Healing Farm was discussed.

The theme of the twelfth Camp was *Strengthening Ngunnawal Language*

(Funded by Chief Minister's Department)

Facilitator was John Rudder who had worked for some years in documenting the Wiradjuri language. He had come to help Elders start to think about their Ngunnawal language and how to restore it. A word list was made from the words people still use in their everyday lives, and there was discussion about how the words are pronounced, and how they can be written down. It was agreed that a linguist should be found to continue this work at the next camp.

Art activities included paintings, and decorating message sticks made by one of the Elders.

The thirteenth Camp was on *Ngunnawal Language 2*.

(Funded by Chief Minister's Department)

Before the camp started, Elders attended the launch of the book *Stories of the Ngunnawal* which had now been published. The Chief Minister, Mr Jon Stanhope, officially launched the book and spoke about the stories in it.

The workshops on language were facilitated by two linguists from the Australian National University: Jutta Besold and Jo Caffery. Both had experience in working with Aboriginal communities on their language. They handed out some old documents from the mid-1900's where Ngunnawal words had been written down when people could still speak Ngunnawal fluently. There was some excitement amongst the Elders to find more words of their language.

The Chief Minister, Mr Jon Stanhope, had been invited for afternoon tea, and responded to some issues raised by the Elders. One of these was the proposed Healing Camp and where it was up to.

The fourteenth Camp continued the theme of *Ngunnawal Language 3*.

(Funded by ACT Health Promotion)

This time, Jutta Besold was joined by another linguist, John Giacon, in facilitating the workshops. Work continued on words and pronunciations, with discussion about the difference between English sounds and those used in Aboriginal languages. Some of these used the mouth and tongue differently to English.

Elders were keen to see some evidence of their work, and wanted to focus on a colouring book with Ngunnawal words for their grandchildren.

The fifteenth Camp also focused on *Sustaining Ngunnawal Language*

(Funded by ACT Health Promotion, plus Chief Minister's Department)

This was a packed program. Elders had asked for speakers on some of the issues that concerned their community. So Neil Harwood, Director of Indigenous Services in ACT Family Services came to talk, and responded to many questions.

Elders also heard from Harry Williams and Howard Jones, from ACT Corrections, about the prison planned for the ACT. Again there were plenty of questions.

Facilitators of the language workshops were again Jutta Besold and John Giacon from ANU. It was agreed that Elders wanted to work on a colouring book and a Ngunnawal song in the short term. In the long term there should be a Language Retrieval Project that may take some years.

CONCLUSION

The Sustaining Ngunnawal Culture Strategy was designed to foster amongst the Elders a profound and long-term effect that would filter through to others in the Ngunnawal and wider Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community in the ACT and area.

The Community Development approach of a culturally based process that supported Elders in finding their own solutions is a powerful one.

We now need to continue that support as the solutions are tried and developed. This is an important foundation for the Elders' goal of an Aboriginal 'Healing/Education farm' that will put the solutions into practice on a larger scale.

Comments about the process

- Not a smooth process – for anyone!

Positives:

- Camps provide opportunities for learning together in a culturally appropriate way.
- Supporting each other.
- Starting to sort out own internal issues.
- Group decision making
- Presentation skills
- Growing confidence

I have only touched on the enormous effort the Elders contributed to this ongoing process. The strategies devised by them are at an early stage, and it is imperative to assist Elders in taking this process further.

Some of the essential ingredients of the camps were:

- Ngunnawal Project Manager (voluntary) – to manage programs, process, and cultural content of the camps, and communication with Elders.
- JoHACT Secretariat (voluntary) –venue, bookings, materials, payments, book-keeping and acquittal etc.
- Indigenous Facilitator (casual) – culturally appropriate facilitation and support to participants, and conflict management if necessary.
- Caterer and kitchen hand (casual) – to provide acceptable and healthy meals, including provision for the high number of diabetic participants.

At the end of 2007 the Secretariat and Project Manager withdrew from the camps after offering fifteen camps since early 2003.

The next phase of the *Sustaining Ngunnawal Culture Strategy* is the Aboriginal Healing Farm (Indigenous Drug and Alcohol Rehabilitation Centre) which has now been funded by the ACT Government. There is much to be done in supporting its planning, design and development.

Roslyn Brown
Project Manager