

Change the Environment and You Change the People

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Background

I would like to take you all back in time, further than your lifetime and your parents' lifetimes-back further than the early explorers and the First Fleet to a time long before non-Aboriginal habitation of this land. Three hundred years ago, when my ancestors lived on this land, complex systems existed between each of the language groups. Marriage and behaviour were all governed by strict regulation or law, and the Aboriginal people had developed sophisticated systems of trade, resource management, education and law.

The essence of the Law was reinforced in the way of life of the Aboriginal people. Children learnt by the stories of the Dreamtime, by the example of others, by the repetition of an act or style of behaviour. The right place to sit, the right method to communicate, the right way to look after the land-there was a right way for everything. This Law-Tjukurpa, the observance of Aboriginal Law-was repeatedly reinforced through the way of life, in fact, Aboriginal people believed that Tjukurpa influenced their very survival.

The initiation, for both young men and women, indicated an acceptance of the responsibility for maintaining the Law. This was further reinforced by the position each person held in the community, accompanied by a sense of responsibility for all members of that community. Adults in the community were responsible for ensuring that all children learnt the stories, the songs, the dances and the rituals of living, as well as how to care for the land and manage the resources of this arid continent.

Later, as an elder, one became responsible for ensuring that the Law-Tjukurpa-was upheld, and that, when decisions were made, they observed the learning, collective knowledge and responsibility of a hundred lifetimes.

Then the influx of non-Aboriginal people took place. These newcomers made no attempt to consider any existing Law, code of behaviour or responsibility, and they imposed their form of law enforcement on the Aboriginal people. Our environment was changed and this in turn changed the Aboriginal people. This change caused absolute confusion.

Just imagine if some power greater than the one developed by this society arrived in Australia and imposed a new set of rules for society to live by. Imagine your feelings if this power dictated that a new language be the accepted and only form of communication and that the speech used today be discontinued. Perhaps this new power would also change the method used to trade and obtain food, clothing and shelter. Furthermore, parental rights may be suppressed and children taken from the family unit, and possibly never seen again. This new power might take control of the land and restrict the use of resources that have come to be expected as rightfully ours. This all seems unfair and hardly likely to happen, but consider-this is how my ancestors' environment was changed just two hundred years ago.

Port Lincoln-Changes in the 20th Century

Port Lincoln is no different from any other town or city in Australia. Like most other places, it has an area for shopping, an area for recreation, an area for education, a hospital, a police station, an industrial or business area, and a place for the indigenous people. Over the years, Port Lincoln has become a mixed population. Our community is not a political 'hot spot', nor does it attract a lot of media hype (even though a death in custody has occurred). Port Lincoln also has the same problems with domestic violence and substance abuse which face nearly every other community throughout Australia.

However, the 700 Aboriginal residents in this city are determined to work together towards change-to make life better for themselves and their children's children. It is because of the determination of each individual in the community that changes have occurred.

Around the time of World War II, some Aboriginal families moved from Koonibba Mission down the railway line to jobs at the abattoirs, and on the wheat stacks and wharf in Port Lincoln.

In the 1950s, living conditions for the Aboriginal people were poor. Their homes were built in the scrub on the edge of town and were made out of flattened 44-gallon drums or old discarded galvanised iron. These homes had dirt floors and a hessian or wheat bag doorway. Some Aboriginal people had jobs, bought their own land and built their own homes, but this situation changed when the wheat silos came and the abattoirs closed down. Employment was reduced and most Aboriginal people become totally dependant on the welfare system. A newspaper article in the Port Lincoln Times on 16 January 1958 highlighted the living conditions on the Aboriginal reserve and questioned the future for the 'dead end kids'.

With more enthusiasm than money, government departments and agencies-together with service clubs and church groups-worked toward change with the Aboriginal people. Band-aid measures were put in place, but it was eight years before the first major project was developed and

implemented. In 1991, these 'dead end kids' of 1958 are leaders in their own right in the Port Lincoln community.

New buildings and developments in other areas of Port Lincoln caused flooding several years running in the Aboriginal Reserve, so the reserve had to be moved. Houses were obtained in ordinary streets and, accompanied by complaints from the neighbours, Aboriginal families moved in. These were hard times, but the Council, education, welfare, police and enterprise development groups worked together and changed the community environment again. In doing so, they have changed not only the people but the future for the Port Lincoln community.

For over twenty-five years, the Aboriginal people in Port Lincoln have been working towards breaking the cycle of poverty and family dependence on the welfare system. By doing this, it is realised that the environment is being changed again and this is resulting in a change in the Aboriginal people.

One of the first projects to be started by the Port Lincoln community was one addressing the issue of small children. This project was executed with the assistance of Welfare Department staff and the Save the Children Fund. A preschool kindergarten was established to help socially disadvantaged children learn the skills needed to assist them to take part in the public school system. This program has been refined over the years and presently the Port Lincoln Children's Centre program aims to enrich children's social skills, assist with health, speech and comprehension development and family involvement. It also conducts cross-cultural exchanges involving both staff and students from other centres in Port Lincoln. However, there is a lack of commitment to fund the planned upgrade of this facility and consequent program expansion to cover full-time preschool and day care to meet the needs of community workers, program participants and organisation staff who need to use a child-minding facility.

The next major step occurred in July 1975 when the Port Lincoln Aboriginal Organisation (PLAO) became an incorporated body. Under the care of this group, negotiations were completed for the relocation of the Mallee Park Aboriginal Reserve and, with the assistance of local government, the completion of the Mallee Park Football Oval.

The 1980s saw the birth of the Mallee Park Football Club and, in the space of ten years, the Club won five A-Grade premiership flags-the last four consecutively. The Club won on the field but not in the clubroom. Learning how to manage a business like non-Aboriginal people was a problem-Aboriginal people are encouraged to share amongst the community and it was hard to learn other ways.

The 1980s also saw an abundance of short-term training and employment projects for the Aboriginal people. Whilst these projects kept people occupied for a six-month period, none of them resulted in real jobs. In between projects (or if one missed out on being selected to participate), individuals became more disheartened and sick of trying because, in the end, these projects were just band-aid jobs that did not lead anywhere. Occasionally work would become available at Mallee Park or Poonindie, such as putting up fences, tree planting or gardening, but there were no real jobs or job security. Ultimately, days would be spent sitting, smoking and talking at the Red Shed (a meeting place on the foreshore). Eventually, after all our literacy and numeracy

training, it became the common joke that we would have to be the most-trained unemployed people in Australia.

A Community Plan

In the mid-1980s the PLAO Management Committee decided to write down a community plan setting out the issues and indicating the needs of the Aboriginal people in Port Lincoln. The PLAO Management Committee then set priorities and decided what needed to be done first. Community meetings were held and a survey conducted to get ideas from the community, while at the Red Shed, the Aboriginal people just asked for 'somewhere to go, something to do and some pay for the work they had done'.

Police liaison

The Aboriginal people did not want 'sit down money', they wanted to earn their pay, so a Police Liaison Group was started and meetings were held to formalise a working relationship between Aboriginal people and police. Chief Inspector Barry Willoughby and Chief Inspector Peter Cameron set the groundwork for the Aboriginal Police Aides (subject to funding for 1991-92).

Community relations

The establishment of the Police Liaison Group was followed by the commencement of a Community Relations Group Committee mainly consisting of welfare-type agency people. This committee met to brainstorm and develop plans dealing with specific situations. Towards the end of the 1980s, Aboriginal women started sewing classes and five of the 'Red Shed' men got jobs as contract workers with the National Parks. A group of volunteers worked solidly for a year and, after about 3,000 hours of meetings, a plan for the introduction of one of the first Urban Community Development Employment Programs in Australia was constructed.

Community Development

In the 1990s, there are about 700 Aboriginal people living in Port Lincoln-approximately 5 per cent of the population. Our aim to break the welfare cycle targets specific sections of community development and has both corporate specific project plans addressing the following specific issues: employment, training and enterprise.

In addressing these issues, several project plans were introduced:

- **Aboriginal Early Childhood Education Program (AECEP):** is an annexe of the Magill Campus, University of South Australia, and a local training proposal which aims to make it possible for Aboriginal people to obtain formal teaching qualifications without having to move to study full-time in Adelaide. This sets a good role model for the junior primary children.

- **Poonindie Farm Re-development:** a remnant of the first Native Training Institution in Australia. The 313 acres are not viable for broad acre farming so a fencing, pilot gardening, rabbit eradication program and extensive re-tree program has been established. A Landscape Design Consultancy is in the final stages of determining the future development.
- **Mainstream Employment:** the local Commonwealth Employment Service obtained short-term work for Aboriginal people in mainstream employment situations, but there were no real job prospects. After the training period, the individual was laid off as there was no ongoing employment.
- **The Women's Group, Ngura Kanpi:** is designed to help Aboriginal women learn skills and gain confidence, and in the future plans to include enterprise development and self-sufficiency courses. Projects include printing, painting, sewing, catering, childcare, jewellery making, health and small business management. Currently a sub-program of PLAO, this group has approximately 150 weekly participants and is currently working towards incorporation.
- **The Contract Employment Program with the South Australian National Parks and Wildlife Service (SANPWS):** aims to help long-term unemployed to work in Land Management particularly in the areas of Walking Trail Development, interpretive centres and signs, establishment and maintenance of Camp grounds, re-tree/re-vegetation projects, fire fighting and rabbit control. A sub-program of PLAO, this group of five workers has become one of the first contract programs in Australia to obtain mainstream employment for a project participant within the SANPWS. A South Australian first is also anticipated under the National Parks Preferential Tendering Plan for a fencing contract.
- **Kuju Community Development Employment Program:** aims to develop a self-supporting enterprise base for the community and assist participants to follow career development paths. Projects include Yard Gang, Wood Gang, mechanics workshop, and community workers within specific projects (for example, schools, Department of Correctional Services, PLAO, Aboriginal Visitor's Scheme, and the Library). This project is incorporated in its own right and employs 92 previously unemployed people.
- **Wanilla Forest:** the development of a management plan is underway for this former Woods and Forest Department resource. Wanilla Forest is a hardwood forest covering about 2,000 acres with some contamination from the use of a CCA wood post-treatment plant. The community won the tender for the future use of the forest and, with the assistance of the South Australian Minister for Aboriginal Affairs, the title is being transferred to the Aboriginal Lands Trust. The forest will be managed as a commercial enterprise and employment venture. However, some sections of the forest have

conservation value for native vegetation and as a habitat for the Funereal or Yellow Tailed Black Cockatoo so the SANPWS have been involved in the joint management of Wanilla Forest.

- **Mallee Park Sports Complex:** a revised approach for the management of the Club is being undertaken so that the Club includes input and representation from all sports, not just football.
- **Childcare:** A planned approach to expanding the services available from the Port Lincoln Children's Centre, providing planned childcare for participants in the Community Development Employment (CDEP) programs and participants at the Women's Group House.
- **Health:** Consolidation of all sections of health including provision for the community to include Aboriginal health workers, a Family Care program and a Substance Abuse program. This is to be expanded to deal with the whole issue not just part. Under the National Health Strategy, money has been made available for a study of this community need.
- **Law and Justice:** Regular community relations group meetings and police liaison meetings are aimed at predicting problem times and areas and developing strategies to deal with these problems. Supplying volunteers for the Department of Correctional Services Visitors' Scheme and workers within the system, games nights and activities in the prison, coordination of activities with an Offenders Aid and Rehabilitation Service (OARS) Worker, negotiating for legal right's representation, development of Aboriginal Police Visitors' Scheme and employment of a coordinator to negotiate for Aboriginal police aides, crime prevention.
- **Youth:** Nunga Youth Program, extend workers, support Youth Action Committee, camps, Out of School Hours program, Vacation Care program. This area is presently under review. Currently, one youth worker works thirty hours per week and sees about 100 children. This is unacceptable and is a real problem which needs to be redressed.

Vacation Care and Out of School Hours programs are aimed at primary school-aged children and approximately fifty to sixty children attend each evening. The youth section needs a lot of planning and money to provide an interesting and challenging program for these young people. Ballroom dancing could not replace the adrenalin buzz of riding a stolen motorbike on the beach, and this problem is being addressed.

- **Education:** Establishing an effective Aboriginal Education Worker (AEW) network, expanding the Aboriginal education profile, encouraging school interaction within the Aboriginal community, for example, National Aboriginal and Islander Day Observance

Committee (NAIDOC) activities, school use of facility, representation on school committees, and expansion of the Aboriginal Studies program relevant to local people.

- **Land and Heritage:** Develop Land Management Resource Plans, the Poonindie development, and Wanilla Forest Management Plan. Retrieve the language, oral history, stories, and law. Develop a 'Keeping Place', and tie all these issues into the Aboriginal Heritage Act 1988 (SA).
- **Community and Policy Development:** Finalisation of the community plan Towards the Year 2000 Stage 2. Set the vision and goals for each program, develop strategies to address each situation, evaluate projects to assess the effectiveness of the proposal. Develop PLAO policy document. Assist management in setting and devising appropriate policy decisions relating to the Aboriginal community.
- **Housing:** Although there is an Aboriginal Housing Board, only a handful of Aboriginal people own their own homes, and there is no a hostel or emergency accommodation. On behalf of a group of older men, PLAO is currently negotiating for a local government and community housing grant that will provide suitable accommodation.

This is just the tip of the iceberg, although some things have changed. It is easier for my children at school than it was for me, but Aboriginal people are still finding it hard to keep teenagers interested at high school so that they can get better jobs. In all the businesses in Port Lincoln there are only two Aboriginal people employed in their own right, all others are there as a result of subsidies and at virtually no cost to the employer.

Aboriginal People Need Role Models for Their Children

The projects and programs outlined provide examples to our children. In late 1989 a local delicatessen owner who had complained about the children's behaviour in the past said that there had been a considerable improvement in their behaviour. A teller in a local bank commented on the change in Aboriginal customers when asking to withdraw their wages, and a class teacher commented on the change in attendance and behaviour of a high school student after the father obtained full-time employment.

The Chief Executive Officer of the Port Lincoln City Council also said that since PLAO had started their programs (that is the Women's Group, National Parks Contract Employment, Community Development Employment Program, Substance Abuse and Visitors' Schemes programs), there had been a significant decrease in the problems associated with Aboriginal people on the foreshore. PLOA have not shifted the problems anywhere else, rather the causes have been addressed and strategies developed that aim to meet the needs of Aboriginal people.

Crime Prevention in the Port Lincoln Aboriginal Community has been developing slowly over the last twenty to thirty years. All the programs

PLAO have in place in Port Lincoln indicate that the whole situation has been approached from a community base. By addressing unemployment, low self-esteem, low socioeconomic standing, welfare dependency, low education, and substandard housing and living conditions, PLAO has developed a general social reform plan aimed at breaking the welfare dependency cycle and addressing the cycle of poverty. In doing this, PLAO has inadvertently also addressed the issue of crime prevention.

PLAO Has Not Done This On Its Own

Everyone in the Port Lincoln Community has a share in the responsibility of synchronising a total community approach to a common problem, but this will cost a lot of money. Many different phrases have surfaced in the last few years. We have heard about self-determination and self-administration. We have also heard about self-management and 'Set Up To Fail'. We have heard about band-aid short-term projects, RED scheme, CEP, law, justice and social justice strategies and now we have heard about crime prevention. It does not matter how a situation is viewed, the bottom line to every solution is money.

PLAO is proud of what has been achieved. Aboriginal people walk tall again: when they go to a shop they pay for their goods with money they have earned not with a government handout; they are proud of their homes; and mothers learn to sew and dress their children in smart clothes they have made themselves. Change has come slowly. A quote attributed to Robert Louis Stevenson says it well:

Life is not a matter of holding good cards but of playing a poor hand well.

In Port Lincoln and as Aboriginal people, PLAO may not hold many good cards but we are playing a very good game.