

Access track construction in Maralinga Tjarutja Lands: a success story



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Introduction

The Maralinga Tjarutja Lands comprise over 80 000 km² of land on the southern fringe of the Great Victoria Desert. The land was handed back to the Anangu traditional owners under the *Maralinga Tjarutja Land Rights Act 1984*. Maralinga Tjarutja Inc. (MT) was established under the Act as the body corporate to administer all matters concerning the Maralinga Tjarutja Lands.

Oak Valley was established in 1985 as a community out-station for Anangu displaced from the Maralinga Lands for the British nuclear tests and is the only Aboriginal community located on the Maralinga Tjarutja Lands. The community is ~520 km NW of Ceduna, the nearest regional centre.

Numerous mineral and petroleum exploration licences have been granted across the Maralinga Tjarutja Lands. Several exploration agreements have already been signed between MT and mining companies and many others are pending. In determining these agreements, MT has embarked on a proactive strategy to create as many mining and exploration related employment opportunities as possible for Anangu (few employment opportunities are available in remote locations such as Oak Valley). For example, over several years many Anangu at Oak Valley have qualified as operators for grader, front-end loader, backhoe and bobcat machinery (through Complete Personnel and Training Statewide) and MT own this equipment.

In June 2006 MT signed a mining exploration agreement with Lost Sands Pty Ltd (a subsidiary of Diatreme Resources Limited) for the Lost Sands Project. Diatreme Resources – Lost Sands are exploring for heavy mineral sands in the Eucla Basin in both Western Australia and South Australia. The agreement included a clause giving preference to MT to construct the access tracks.

Track construction

Access track construction at the Lost Sands Project required a bulldozer to make the initial cut, followed by a grader to finish the tracks to the required standard. MT did not possess a bulldozer or have qualified operators. The Maralinga Piling Trust¹ supported the venture by purchasing a second-hand bulldozer and operator training was scheduled to link with Lost Sands' exploration time frame.

Due to the inexperience of the Oak Valley work team and doubt that the scheduled 10-hour working days could be achieved, Lost Sands initially contracted MT to construct only 100 km of track with contract extension subject to a performance review. As a further precaution, Lost Sands contracted a local professional earth moving company to start the project whilst the operator plant training was being undertaken at Oak Valley.

Negotiations were based on a benchmark of 7–8 km/day of track construction for an experienced work team (subject to the nature of the terrain) and 3–4 km/day for the MT team. The professional contractor achieved 12 km or more of track per day; the MT team achieved over 16 km on most days and over 20 km on others. The estimated 50-day project was completed in 17 days resulting in significant cost savings to Lost Sands. Other project outcomes for MT were:

- temporary employment for one team member as a support person to Terra Search Pty Ltd (on behalf of Lost Sands)
- promise of the contract for the second stage of track construction
- a modest profit (these funds were set aside to support future employment and economic development projects)

¹ Manages compensation monies granted by the Australian Government to the traditional owners as a result of the loss of access to Maralinga Lands due to British nuclear tests.



Access track construction. (Photo 406632)

- negotiations initiated by Lost Sands for a further contract to cart water, and interest expressed in hiring other plant and equipment from Oak Valley
- two MT team members have been given full-time contracts as Roads Maintenance Officers following earlier casual work.

Summary

There has been a lot of rhetoric in recent years about the economic benefits for Indigenous people from mining ventures. With training support from Complete Personnel and Training Statewide, and capital support from the Maralinga Piling Trust, MT has managed to start converting the rhetoric into reality. Subsequent projects undertaken by MT in 2007 include:

- A smaller exploration access track project for Dominion Mining NL that also surpassed the time frame benchmark (completed in 10 days rather than the 20 days estimated).
- Around 1250 km of exploration access track currently under construction for Officer Basin Energy Pty Ltd.

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