



FACT SHEET 1

KIWIRRKURRA – THE EARLY DAYS

The families at Kiwirrkurra form part of the broader group known as the Pintupi, or Western Desert people. Before colonisation, the Pintupi people lived a traditional life, with little changed from centuries past. They lived a migratory life, surviving as hunters and gatherers in the desert rich in food and other resources.

In this traditional life, the people coped with, and adapted to, the range of hazards that occurred in the landscape. The strategies they employed formed an integrated part of the lifestyle and day to day life.

Within a relatively short period of time after contact with white society almost all of the Pintupi had left or were removed from their country. During their extended relocation into other settlements, the Pintupi people managed to preserve much of their traditional culture and social organization. In addition, they maintained a strong desire to return to their own country.

The Homelands Movement, a part of the land rights activism of the 1960s and 1970s, saw many Indigenous people return to their country. Not only did this enable them to look after the sacred places of their ancestors, a return to country also provided opportunities to pass on languages and traditions to future generations. The Homelands Movement also meant control of the land and care for country.

Initially Kiwirrkurra was a Pintupi outstation, originally built in 1982 to facilitate the Pintupi people's desire to return and live on traditional land. After the first bore was drilled and equipped in 1984, residents came to live permanently in Kiwirrkurra.

A Kiwirrkurra sacred site located not far from the community is mentioned in the Tingari Dreaming song cycle, describing the ancestral elders travelling through the desert to create landforms and teach law.

In October 1984, a family of nine Pintupi, referred to as the 'Lost Nomads' or the 'Pintupi Nine', were reunited with their extended family at Kiwirrkurra. Until this time the small group had lived a nomadic life moving from waterhole to waterhole. It is believed they had become separated from other Pintupi more than twenty years earlier and when 'found' the group had never seen a motor vehicle, worn clothes nor had any contact with Western society.





FACT SHEET 2

THE KIWIRRKURRA COMMUNITY

Kiwirrkurra is one of the most remote communities in the world. Located in the Gibson Desert in Western Australia, it lies 1200kms to the east of Port Hedland, and 850kms to the west of Alice Springs

Although Kiwirrkurra falls within the boundaries of the East Pilbara Shire (administered from Newman in Western Australia, some 1050 kms away), the community has closer ties with, and is geographically closer to Alice Springs. Despite Kiwirrkurra lying officially beyond the area of the Ngaanyatjarra communities, the Ngaanyatjarra Council is active in supporting the Kiwirrkurra community, through the provision of services such as legal and anthropological advice, administrative support, commercial air transport and health services.

Kiwirrkurra is now home to some 150 residents, 68% of whom are under 30 years of age.

The people of Kiwirrkurra have very strong affinity for hunting which is an important source of food. Their hunting techniques and skills are amongst the best in the region. Other cultural activities of significance to the people include gathering bush products, hosting people from other communities, travelling on culture and lore business, and participating in ceremonies.

The community has an administration centre, a health clinic, community store, and women's centre, a Community Development Employment Program workshop, an art centre and a school. Like many remote Indigenous communities, the oval and basketball court are focal points for the Kiwirrkurra youth.

The sand dunes, red soil and spinifex surrounding the community are immediate reminders of the aridity of the local environment. (The median annual rainfall of the area is 243mm.) Temperatures range from 2°C in winter, to over 45°C in summer. Prevailing winds from the west create large dust storms, which are common during the summer.





FACT SHEET 3

KIWIRRKURRA & WESTERN DESERT ART

The paintings of the Kiwirrkurra people reflect the extraordinary sense of their country in the Western Desert. The women's centre at Kiwirrkurra is a popular facility offering income generating opportunities for the women of the community, while the men paint in their homes or at a centre established by Papunya Tula.

The modern movement of the Western Desert art became known to mainstream through the work of Geoffrey Bardon who established the Papunya Tula Artists Cooperative in the early 1970s. Originally sent to Papunya to teach elementary western knowledge to the children, Bardon inspired and encouraged senior men to transfer their traditional visual language (U-shapes, concentric circles and journey lines) onto a range of contemporary media.

The Western Desert art movement developed through a number of phases over the years which have been marked by changes in style, technique, type of imagery and even palette.

The art of the 1971-73 period was largely unrestrained, intense, somewhat raw and confined to small format. Painting content consisted mainly of naturalistic elements many of which were of a sacred and secret nature.

By 1974, the naturalistic imagery, in particular those sacred elements had been largely replaced by conventional symbols which were ingeniously combined with background and foreground dotting. Larger painting surfaces facilitated the depiction of artist's country, ancestral journeys and mythological events. As a result of the Western Desert art movement being dominated by men (up until the early 1990's) painting subjects were essentially associated with the mythological events of the Tingari, the creator beings brought law and order to the people of the Western Desert.

Throughout the late 1970's and 1980's the Western Desert art movement continued to evolve. One noticeable feature was the increasing abstraction and linear quality of various painting styles.

By 1994 a number of senior women joined the Papunya Tula. Their very own, highly distinctive style (consisting of thickly applied paint, spontaneous designs, and a broad colourful palette) very soon contributed towards a most dynamic and innovative art movement, one which continues to dominate the field of contemporary Aboriginal art today.

Adapted from: http://www.gallerygondwana.com.au/western_desert/western_desert_info.htm (Accessed 24 March 2009)





FACT SHEET 4

THE KIWIRRKURRA LANDS

Kiwirrkurra is surrounded by traditional homelands located at Nyinmi, Jupiter Well, Mukula, Winparrku, Maruwa near Lake Mackay, Yarki, Mintardi near Kintore and Tarku.

Although Kiwirrkurra falls within the boundaries of the East Pilbara Shire (administered from Newman in WA), the community has closer ties with, and is geographically closer to Alice Springs.

The Kiwirrkurra native title holders received legal recognition of their traditional native title rights and interests on 19 October 2001. The Tjamu Tjamu (Aboriginal Corporation) is the prescribed body corporate established by the Kiwirrkurra native title holders. Tjamu Tjamu holds in trust the native title rights and interests on behalf of the Kiwirrkurra native title holders.

The native title determination covers an area of 42,860 square kilometres and gives the Kiwirrkurra people:

- a. the right to live on the Determination Area;
- b. the right to make decisions about the use and enjoyment of the land and waters of the Determination Area;
- c. the right to hunt and gather, and to take water and other traditionally accessed resources (including ochre) for the purpose of satisfying their personal, domestic, social, cultural, religious, spiritual and communal needs;
- d. the right to control access to, and activities conducted by others on, the land and waters of the Determination Area;
- e. the right to maintain and protect sites which are of significance to the Kiwirrkurra people under their traditional laws and customs; and
- f. the right as against any other Aboriginal group or individual to be acknowledged as the traditional Aboriginal owners of the Determination Area.





FACT SHEET 5

THE 2001 FLOOD AT KIWIRRKURRA

The flood at Kiwirrkurra in 2001 had a back drop in 2000 when heavy rains cut off road access to the community for a number of months. Flood mitigation works were planned, but had not yet been implemented when the 2001 flood occurred.

Between 3-5 March 2001, unusually heavy rainfall in the Kimberley and Pilbara regions caused widespread flooding in the desert. The Kiwirrkurra community was one of the areas seriously affected by the waters which were the result of run-off being trapped in the low-lying basins with little or no drainage outlets.

The ground was unable to absorb much of the flood water due to the unusually high watertable in the area resulting from the high rainfall the previous year.



Later in March, shortly after contractors had begun to clean up the houses and grade the roads, there were further heavy rains. The water levels in the community rose again and the physical recovery works were postponed for some time.

The people had to be evacuated, and it took approximately eighteen months for the community to be re-established at Kiwirrkurra.





FACT SHEET 6

SURVIVING THE FLOODS, RETURNING HOME

With their homes flooded and uninhabitable, the residents of the Kiwirrkurra community were forced to stay in the school for four days, with limited food and facilities. The flood caused essential services to fail and people's health was put at risk. It was therefore decided it would be best if all 170 residents were evacuated.

When the decision was made to evacuate their homes, it was important to the Kiwirrkurra people that they stay together as a community. As there was no evacuation centre in the Pintupi lands, they were flown in Defence Force helicopters to the Norforce Army Base in Alice Springs. This base was only available for 4 weeks, so other options had to be considered. The Fire and Emergency Services Authority of Western Australia arranged for the group to move to Morapoi Station in the Goldfields, some 2000 km away from Kiwirrkurra.



Away from their country, the Kiwirrkurra people experienced severe disruption to the social fabric of their community. One aspect related to an increase in alcohol related violence - Kiwirrkurra is normally a dry community, but at Morapoi and Alice Springs the community had access to alcohol.

Shortly after arriving in Morapoi, the Kiwirrkurra community made a decision to move closer to their homelands. Raising money to buy cars for themselves by selling their paintings, the community decided to separate until they could return home. Along the way they stayed at various communities and townships, keeping in touch as often as they could. By August 2002, when the people were able to start returning home, they had been away for nearly eighteen months.





FACT SHEET 7

PREPARING FOR THE FUTURE

Following the Kiwirrkurra floods, work was undertaken to assist drainage of water and for the protection of the community should there be another flood.

These flood mitigation works were completed by mid-2002, and consisted of:

- a relief channel between two lakes
- the construction of levees and flood channels at the airstrip, and
- the construction of a levee at the community.

Following the evacuation and relocation of the Kiwirrkurra residents, the Western Australian Fire and Emergency Services Authority (FESA) appointed a recovery coordinator and provided support for the community. FESA staff continue to visit the community, and are working together with the residents to encourage and enable them to take greater responsibility for their own safety by being better prepared for emergencies. Importantly, the people at Kiwirrkurra know who to contact to discuss their concerns, and are involving themselves in planning what to do for future emergency events.



FESA recognise that remote Indigenous communities have diverse and complex emergency management needs. The complexities are often a result of isolation, vulnerability and exposure to natural hazards, inadequate services and infrastructure, transient populations, accessibility issues and entrenched levels of disadvantage. Different governance structures and statutory arrangements and distinctive languages and customs in communities add to the challenges

of developing a national approach to emergency management. Within this context, many Indigenous communities are especially vulnerable as they have a significantly diminished capacity to recover from the impact of natural disasters and other emergencies.

FESA have developed a program - *Safer Country - Community Centered Emergency Risk Management* - which encourages Indigenous people to identify, evaluate and treat risks to prevent or reduce the impact of emergencies in their own communities.





FACT SHEET 8

USEFUL LINKS

[Papunya Tula Artists](#)

News stories of the Kiwirrkurra people returning
www.abc.net.au/worldtoday/stories/s675749.htm
www.abc.net.au/am/stories/s647195.htm

[Ngaanyatjarra Council](#)

[Kiwirrkurra Native Title Determination](#)

[Remote Indigenous Advisory Committee](#)

[Keeping Our Mob Safe](#)

[Australian Emergency Management Glossary](#)

State and Territory Emergency Services

Fire and Emergency Services of Western Australia
www.fesa.wa.gov.au

Qld Department of Emergency Services
www.emergency.qld.gov.au

NSW Office for Emergency Services
www.emergency.nsw.gov.au/home

South Australian Fire and Emergency Services Commission
www.emergency.nsw.gov.au

Northern Territory Police, Fire and Emergency Services
www.nt.gov.au/pfes

Victoria State Emergency Services
www.nt.gov.au/pfes

ACT Emergency Services Agency
www.esa.act.gov.au

State Emergency Services Tasmania
www.ses.tas.gov.au

