

## Claimant comment

### Valerie Cooms – Quandamooka Native Title Claim

Valerie Cooms belongs to the Nunukal people of Minjeeriba (North Stradbroke Island in Queensland). She has three children and six grandchildren. Valerie has worked for the Australian Public Service for many years in the areas of Health, Employment and Training, Native Title and the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody. She is currently completing her PhD with Queensland University of Technology in Brisbane.

#### Where is the Quandamooka claim at now?

The claim is currently in negotiation/mediation stage. I think the State is about to tell us what the offer looks like. And now we have to decide whether it's a good or bad offer. It's hard to judge what a good or bad offer is. Something, even if it's not really that good, looks better than nothing to people who have never had anything. What we don't want is our PBC to start out in serious debt. You have to be careful what you wish for and what you get. There are interesting times ahead.

#### What is the toughest thing about the native title process?

The hardest thing about the native title process is how it has split the community. We are used to fighting with white people for land. We've been doing that for a long time and, in a sense, it brings us together. But, because of the nature of native title, it has split a lot of families and parts of the community.

The reaction of non-indigenous people on the island is interesting. It seems like white people don't mind if native title is 'way out', somewhere they never go, or if they do, on a tourist venture. When it's there, right under their noses, they don't cope very well. An example of this is the State telling us we are too close to Brisbane... when the Government built Brisbane after we were there; it's not our fault that there is a capital city across the bay. The non-indigenous residents are very paranoid... We hear them saying "the Aborigines in the bush, coming back to live here!" And I think to myself 'so? It's our island! The Court

says it's our island, why wouldn't we move back?' This land issue is a big problem for non-indigenous people.

Another tough part of native title, is dealing with the State and the Court. Sitting in the Court and I see this large emblem with a kangaroo and emu looking back at me and I think to myself "why am I in here!?" I also have issues with all the changes to the *Native Title Act*. Whenever there is a change to the Act, it's never a change in our favour, always a change for somebody else.

#### What will recognition of native title rights and interests mean to you?

We are almost over the line but there is still a long way to go yet. I think it will be the end of a long struggle for a lot of our mob. It's so good to get back to 'Straddie'. I get a spring in my step and I think 'does the government even understand how precious this land is to us?' Obviously they don't. But then I think 'it doesn't matter what you white fellas think, this is my country and I belong here, more than you will ever belong and more than you will ever understand'.

It has changed though... My mother didn't recognise any of the landscape after the mines had come and gone. The big sand hills had gone and she thought she was somewhere else. My mum used to know the island like the back of her hand. The first time mother found out that the land wasn't hers was when we lodged the native title claim.

With all her experience in dealing with the Government, she said 'they'll just give us the swamp'. We need more than this.

We need to capitalise from native title, get on the front foot and control the National Parks and run tourist ventures. It will not only do us a world of good economically and socially, but it will do the white people who come to the island good, to see us running things, as the recognised owners of this place. We need industry on the island so people don't have to leave their traditional lands to seek work or education. At the moment, if we are lucky we might get a labouring job with the mines. We deserve better than that, hopefully native title will help deliver on some of this.

