

STRONGER CONNECTIONS MAKE STRONGER PEOPLE: AN INTERVIEW WITH PATRICK WHEELER, ON BEHALF OF THE TAGALAKA PEOPLE



Patrick Wheeler. Credit: North Queensland Land Council (NQLC).

On 10 December 2012, the Federal Court recognised the Tagalaka people as native title holders, granting rights and interests over lands and waters in the south-east Gulf of Carpentaria, including the township of Croydon.

The Tagalaka region

The determination area is about 30,000 square kilometres and is about 700 to 800 kilometres directly west of Cairns. It incorporates three local government areas and parts of the Carpentaria Shire as well as Etheridge Shire.

Croydon itself was a major gold mining town back in the late 1800s. It was actually the third largest town in Queensland if that gives you any indication of the population of Croydon back then. The population of Croydon today is only about 300 people if that, so obviously times have changed. As far as country is concerned, it can be very harsh country but then it's what you make of the country.

The area changes, from hilly country to hard, rough, harsh terrain. If we are lucky we have a three monthly wet season. You need to know the country, where the water is and the river systems. If you have respect for the country, the country will look after you. There are areas heading towards the west of the claim area, over towards Normanton, where it is very harsh as well. There is a lot of timber growth, but not timber as in rainforest; stunted timber due to

the limited wet seasons. You have to also think about the remnants of the mining days: there are that many mine shafts, particularly around the town itself, that you can't just go wandering around.

The native title process

The claim process took more than 10 years. It started back in 1998, when the original claim was lodged, and then the second claim came in 2001. In between those two claims, while establishing native title, many Indigenous land use agreements (ILUAs) were negotiated and put in place. It was a long period of time to wait for a native title determination, but the benefit of that long process was the awareness and education for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples that came out of it.

Like most communities, we all know the past isn't something we can really boast about. Through the process of dispossession a lot of people were forcibly removed from the area: as far up north as Weipa, down to the likes of Cherbourg and east to Palm Island. The 10 years plus leading to the determination brought people back together. People were connected to this region through that process. You had people at the planning meetings saying, 'Oh look, this is my Grandmother and that's my Grandfather' and so on. Some of these people have known and worked with each other for years and didn't even know they had connections to each other and back to this country.

We have a lot of unwritten knowledge, but it's all verbal stuff. It's disappointing that the native title system places so much emphasis on written knowledge. Anthropologists came through here in the 1900s and it's their snapshots in time that have now become gospel. When we do native title connection back to country through modern processes with computers and so forth, a lot of our oral history no longer exists. Once we established all that connection again it really made everyone feel as though they had returned back home.

That re-connection to country will now be around forever. Before that it was like trying to put the pieces of a jigsaw back in to place. So now there are people who can come forward and claim their native title rights. It's going to be something that our education curriculum doesn't provide, this kind of education or service. Now that we have access to information that came out of the determination you can see who you belong to or where you come from or who you are related to throughout the whole Croydon region. Stronger connections make stronger people and obviously a brighter future can be established out of that. A lot of that old history will provide a sense of community and a sense of belonging.

Challenges

Native title is a challenge within itself, even today. For a lot of Tagalaka people, being geographically isolated certainly disadvantages us. Having limited funds or no funds to try and educate ourselves in this whole process was the main challenge. If things had been different, if we were in a better financial situation, and if navigating the native title system was more widely communicated, many of our challenges would have been easier to understand and overcome.

The Tagalaka people overcame these challenges through their ambition, passion and endurance. It's the same story around Australia, where you got all these Indigenous people who are passionate and keen about making things happen. Although sometimes this comes at a cost: being away from families, being able to do this on limited funds, and sometimes no funds at all. If it meant that we had to go to Cairns that often meant that the directors [of the Tagalaka Aboriginal Corporation] had to put up the money themselves out of their own pockets. So that's one significant way in which we overcame these challenges; pure passion and a commitment to making this native title determination happen.



Auntie Janet Busch with Justice Logan at the Tagalaka determination.

Credit: NQLC.

Going forward

The Tagalaka Aboriginal Corporation has a long established history pre-native title and this corporation is now undergoing a transition period as it becomes the PBC [Prescribed Body Corporate]. For Tagalaka to go forward it's really important that we have good knowledge of the native title system and processes, for example, the *Native Title Act* and the PBC constitutions. Once that becomes apparent, people will say 'hold on, these people do know about native title'. Your vision is then formulated based on knowledge.

After building that knowledge base, then opportunities will present themselves. We can't get up and say 'We're going to do this and we're going to do that' without first knowing the system.

Obviously there is still a long way to go, especially in terms of understanding native title. But at least now with the determination in place there are pathways to go forward collaboratively. If there are more seats around the native title table, it will be for the benefit of all.

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ACCESS TO AIATSIS PRINT & AUDIOVISUAL COLLECTIONS

By Grace Koch

Grace Koch, Native Title Research and Access Officer (NTRAO), has returned from five months long service leave and is ready to help you with requests for native title-related material from the AIATSIS Library and Audiovisual Archives. While she was away, Rita Metzenrath from the Library acted in the position and brought much professionalism in information management to clients. Rita has returned to her substantive position in the Library, so please contact Grace Koch for native title requests from now on.

Some of the services provided include:

- Catalogue searches and listings of AIATSIS Library and Archives holdings
- Arranging for individual and group research visits

- Copying relevant material from the Library or the Audiovisual Archives
- Providing contacts for further research and relevant Indigenous organisations

Searches can be done for you if you provide the NTRAO with names, geographical areas, or language groups that you are researching. These can be sent either by email or provided in hard copy. All information provided will be treated as confidential.

There are benefits in visiting AIATSIS to do your research as you can work directly with the NTRAO and, where you require copies of items, you may make photocopies free of charge. If you can't arrange to visit, photocopying services are 50c per page and quotes for copies of audiovisual materials can be provided on request.

The NTRAO can provide help from 9am–5pm Mondays through Fridays. Although the Library operates on more limited hours, native title clients can have full service the entire working day.

Please contact the
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Or the general service
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