

# ***The Way Ahead in East Arnhem Land***

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**In this Salt Water Country I look to the wisdom of the ancestors to guide us here and I honour the Traditional Custodians of this land, the Larrakia people, and all the clans that are gathered here today as we look at the way ahead in East Arnhem Land.**

**If we are to value one another's ideas and appreciate the local needs of every person in every community, it helps to think of the Big Picture and the *common good*.**

**After more than 50 years of world wandering and encountering some extraordinary and very rapid changes, I say that I have seen evidence that the entire human family stands at a crossroads. Which way to the *Promised Land*?**

**It is not only the painful choice of which direction to take to overcome the current global economic crisis in a world in which everyone now seems connected by an appetite for materialism... and massive debt. It is a bigger and even more important choice of whether our species will endure as sentient custodians of the earth.**

**What we are really discussing here today is whether in East Arnhem, and indeed in every part of this country we love, we can maintain the respectful *custodianship* to maintain the balance and well being not only of all people but of other life on earth.**

**As I warned over a decade ago in my book, *A LIFE OF EXTREMES*, there is clear evidence that our world is now in the midst of its 6<sup>th</sup> mass extinction of species.**

***"By 2100 one third of all living species may be gone. Watch the birds now on the wing because of the extant 10,000 species, 7000 are in drastic decline. Take a long walk through a forest and take a deep drink on its beauty because up to 50,000 of the world's 250,000 kinds of plants are expected to disappear over the next few decades.***

***....As bad as it is now, it can get much worse."***

**I am not revelling in catastrophe theory. Species extinction is a fact of life few of us want to face. We humans are the most terrifying predator ever to walk the earth, a species of *natural born killers* driving the destruction of life and habitat.**

**As a foreign correspondent, writer and film-maker, I have seen the unforgettable beauty and the stunning diversity and surprise in nature. I realise that we are still 'discovering' new wonders, even many species that have escaped our eyes until now. But the evidence is overwhelming that there is an extraordinary struggle for life underway.**

**We are at war with one another and the earth itself. Most of the thirty odd wars I have witnessed have been the result of critical pressures caused by a desperate contest for the most essential life supporting resources.**

**Already water is drying up for over half a billion people. A billion more are hungry. A loss of arable land and of forests is feeding the growing risk of future wars over water, fuel and food. The unprecedented flood of people crossing borders, thirty million or more, is another sign of the dangers ahead.**

**After travelling the world for over half a century I see a clear pattern. The traditional *custodianship* practiced by Indigenous people for tens of thousands of years has been undermined by a development argument that says we must rapidly exploit the earth's resources to support a global population that will swell to 8 billion by 2025. By midway through this century our species will reach a predicted peak of about 10 billion.**

**Our appetite is nothing less than astonishing. British earth scientist, Norman Myers, calculates that since the end of World War II humans have devoured more raw materials than all of our ancestors combined. So how can we find the balance that may determine not only the fate of so many other species but also the time humans have on earth?**

**Australians as a whole are mesmerised by our mining boom, convinced that being a quarry for China and other hungry nations will ensure our prosperity. As part of an international community whose survival depends on balanced development of the earth's resources and a shared determination to avoid conflict, we have a major responsibility to make wise decisions that outlast narrow, short-term self-interest. It is not clear we have reached that enlightenment.**

**The rush to exploit Australia's mineral riches, largely on Aboriginal lands, is dividing citizens, whole communities, corporations, environmentalists and it's even dividing even brothers and sisters.**

**In the Kimberley and Pilbara regions of Western Australia, across the Northern Territory, on Cape York in Queensland and in parts of New South Wales and South Australia, it is painful to watch the divide and conquer tactics of governments and mining companies.**

**Aboriginal Lands Councils and even extended families are arguing bitterly over whether to take the payoff from mining or try to preserve the land and the natural systems that support all life on Earth. Some Aboriginal elders question whether these choices will ever be compatible but others believe the Traditional Owners must strike the best bargain possible.**

**Across the world I have seen up close the impact of this awesome harvest of natural resources in the First Nations of North America, in parts of Central America such as Guatemala, in the Amazon and other Indigenous lands down**

**the chain of the Andes Mountains. Mineral wealth clearly has been both a blessing and a curse.**

**I have witnessed the long-term health damage caused by uranium mining on Navajo lands, the pollution from coal mining, the scarring of the land and loss of habitat for other species. This is a global pattern.**

**In Papua New Guinea many decades ago I saw the river systems and villages that had borne the brunt of reckless mining. In West Papua, more recently, where the Freeport mine has sliced off the top of a whole mountain, Indonesian soldiers murdered the Indigenous independence leaders who appeared to stand in the way of this golden *El Dorado*. As one of the mine bosses said to me, “How could anyone oppose a hole in the ground that provides half of Indonesia’s Gross National Product?”**

**It is this logic that endangers our species.**

**Across the Top End of Australia giant machines scrape the red dirt country for bauxite, iron ore, coal and uranium. But in a nation where citizens do not own the sub-soil rights to minerals, Australia’s Indigenous people have been denied the control and the full value of most of their lands. So far there is simply no evidence that Australian mining has transformed the poverty or disadvantage of our half a million Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.**

**Despite the Australian government’s enthusiasm for the commodities boom that has minimized the impact of the global financial crisis few of us realise that just 9.2% of our gross domestic product comes from mining and it hires just 1.9% of the workforce.**

**So the direct benefits and long-term benefits of mining to most local people are questionable. The usual pattern when mining development occurs on this scale is that local housing and food prices go up and only the fly-in and fly-out workforce can afford the steeper cost of living. Are we going about this the right way and considering the common good?**

**A balanced conclusion is that the wealth of Aboriginal lands so far has had an important role in keeping our nation strong as others have faltered... but Aboriginal people have been the last to derive any benefit.**

**Yes we have long heard that this is *a once in a lifetime boom*, fuelled by China’s extraordinary growth, but it has been a desperate and at times agonizing struggle for Aboriginal people to keep control of their sacred entitlement.**

**Are we willing as a nation to find the balance of responsibility to the land and all of its people?**

**A genuine sense of the common good means that we think not only about ourselves and our children, but all of our children. This is a belief that is very Australian, grounded in the longer timelines of our history. It is important to understand that in the Indigenous knowledge system, the oldest, continuous**

**story of the development of human learning, there are three ancient Aboriginal concepts that have lasting value for us all. These are custodianship, community and family.**

**Custodianship tells us that every one of us has an individual and a collective responsibility to contribute to the wellbeing of our family and community. This is a responsibility not only for leaders but for every man, woman and child. It leads us to understand and appreciate the common good. It challenges us to raise our voice and contribute to building a brighter society for all of our children and those to come.**

**Without doubt, the greatest Civil Rights challenge for our generation is to bring equality to all of our children. To achieve this we must be honest and recognize that, as a rule, the further children are from the cities, the more disadvantaged they are in health, education and opportunity. This is particularly so for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, the *Children of the Sunrise*.**

**One revolutionary change we can make in East Arnhem is to stop talking about Aboriginal children as “problems” and to realise that in their youthful brilliance and resilience they hold many of the answers in their own heads and hearts. If we use the power of peers we can tap into one of the most underused but astonishing powers in this world.**

**One example is the education movement known as AIME or Australian Indigenous Mentoring Experience, a seven year old project of which I am a director. AIME links 1250 young people as tutors for 1250 Indigenous school students. It is the fastest growing and most hopeful movement I have seen in Indigenous education because it builds a peer driven education process. In this case, it uses undergraduates on ten universities to work with school kids up and down the east coast of Australia but it is also possible to adapt this peer approach to remote communities. I say that this is the most ignored strength in the education field because while we rightly focus heavily on school and teacher quality, we struggle to utilise the fact that peers so often have as much or more influence on children as teachers and parents.**

**Jack Bancroft, a young Koori graduate and his friends created AIME, and the results are very impressive. Instead of that dismal national figure of 47% Indigenous high school completions, more than 80% of AIME students are completing their studies. They are more motivated, stronger in their sense of identity and have a far greater appreciation that learning is not a “gubba” system of knowledge. It’s their birth-right.**

**In remote Australia the challenges are even greater but the underlying principles for hopeful change are the same. In every community and every home we need to develop the demand and valuing of education. We need to understand as Nelson Mandela said that education is the greatest weapon and tool for hopeful change. Education and empowerment are the two necessary ingredients all people need for hopeful change. This is not always a given.**

**When my mother was a child, walking barefoot to a single teacher schoolhouse at Redbournberry, near Singleton in the Hunter Valley, her Aboriginal playmates who lived in a shanty settlement across from her home were not allowed to go to school. She knew this was wrong. When my teenage children were still very young, just this high and visiting remote communities with me, they saw for themselves how little had changed because great swathes of this rich country still had no pre-schools and no high schools, no libraries and no real education pathways for Aboriginal children in remote communities. Like my mother had recognized as a child, my children, Claire and Will also knew that this was unfair. Still in primary school they organised the resources that an Aboriginal teacher asked for and those books and learning toys helped establish the first pre-school in a tin shed in Wugularr, one of the Jawoyn communities, 120 k's south of Katherine. In many ways it was one of our biggest steps with Ian Thorpe's Fountain for Youth, the program of which I have been the honorary or volunteer CEO for the past 10 and a half years.**

**Good pre-schooling allows children to discover a world beyond their home. It fires their imagination, develops independent learning and prepares them for the structure of school. Singing, playing and reading with your children from the time they are babies, shows out in their curiosity and interest in lifelong learning. There is considerable global evidence that investing in your child's pre-schooling is every bit as important as their school or university education. Childhood shapes the lifelong patterns of discovery.**

**This works best in East Arnhem Land when you have Aboriginal parents and educators showing the way and working together. If you constantly threaten Indigenous parents you only remind them that the school was traditionally a part of the oppressive system, even part of a system that removed children from their Culture and their homelands. If you want Aboriginal families to value learning at home and to see the school as a vital part of the community, you must take down the barbed wire that keeps that space between us. We must stop the practice which I know occurred recently in one Top End remote community where the white feller Principle drove around with a megaphone bellowing that if the parents didn't get their kids to school they would go to gaol, This is exactly the wrong way to build a partnership,**

**Don't threaten people. Practice the art of listening, even with the most challenging people you meet, and you will find there is way to move ahead. I have found that the most intelligent people I met in the world all had this ability to suspend their own judgement about others and to listen carefully. It was listening to wise old elders that created the remote school literacy program, the partnership between 22 remote communities and Ian Thorpe's Fountain for Youth.**

**Before he died, the Jawoyn leader, the late Bangardi Lee, asked me to do what I could to help improve the ability of children to read and write. He groaned that he had to go outside his own community to ask someone to write a letter, grovelling to government for support. I listened and when I joined the mourners at his funeral and pressed my hands and the sweat onto his coffin I looked around at the barefoot kids all dressed in their white shirts and black**

**pants...and I made a promise, I would help these children and as many as I could, to read and write, to tell their own stories and be proud of their own culture and knowledge.**

**This explains how good partnerships develop and grow. The Aboriginal people I knew wanted most to close that space between the home and the school. Almost forty years ago when I had begun filming Indigenous struggles all over the world I had come across a wonderful idea called the Navajo Backpack. All we did in our remote communities here was listen and learn together. When Aboriginal parents in a zone that then had about 93% illiteracy asked me to help their efforts to improve the reading and writing of their children, we needed something new. We couldn't go on the same old way undervaluing these children. Those old schools had no public libraries open to the community. We surveyed homes and found most were bookless. So listening to the mothers and fathers and teachers, we enriched the school library and allowed the kids to take home reading in their Literacy Backpacks, reading for themselves, their brothers and sisters and even for their parents.**

**In this low literacy zone of educational distress, we have boosted the ability of many of these children to read and write. There are extraordinary, complex inter-connected education challenges in remote communities. But the truth is most of what has been done in recent decades has not changed the ability of children in these communities to develop the education skills that are life-saving.**

**The remote Indigenous schools hit by the Northern Territory Intervention have seen their attendance worsen in many cases. The Intervention is so much shock and awe but this “top down” approach, even the Prime Minister, Julia Gillard and Opposition Leader, Tony Abbott, now acknowledge was never going to be embraced by most people in most of the 73 remote communities occupied by this state of emergency.**

**The people were never involved in shaping a social engineering emergency response aimed at their children. As a consequence, the Intervention ignored the real evidence of what does lead to community well being and improved education opportunities for Indigenous children. Threats and punishment have not created the successful Indigenous schools anywhere in this nation. Education leadership at a community and school level have brought the change when those educators understand who these children really are.**

**The brightest success stories in the Northern Territory, and I know and work with a few of them, have a strong community ownership and pride in education. They have high attendance rates of between 90 and 94%. They hit the national benchmarks for literacy and numeracy. They speak their languages and they speak English. Their elders are involved in the school because the school is a part of the community.**

**Now I leave it to you to draw the contrast between successful learning communities and those where parents are in great anguish over the breakdown of learning, respect and even Culture, the very essence of identity and well being.**

**We must keep in mind in all of our work together that at least half of the people of your East Arnhem region are very young...and young people see the world in very different terms. It is useless just bemoaning the failures or bad behaviour of the young without ever listening or thinking deeply about why the young are this way. Today the young are connected in a digital age and all that the world tells them is that you better get in for your cut now because this world is in trouble, global economic woes, global warming, global bad times. Who wants to be connected to that gloom and doom?**

**We need to work in a way at the community level that puts a gleam in the eyes of the young and old people. I have seen this in some of the poorest places on earth. We do this by creating programs as communities that truly bring us together and value every life. We do this by being open, honest and considerate of others. Forget about whether you like the other man or woman or child. Remember that we are in this together.**

**Let me give you an example that could allow you to save a life. Most of us here have been to too many funerals like the one I described, too much seemingly endless grieving. But the truth is we could all use life empowering knowledge to prevent a large number of unnecessary early deaths. Again I ask you to look at the Big Picture.**

**There are three major threats to the health of Australian children. The first is the obesity epidemic of lifestyle illnesses; the second is a modern contagion of depression, mental illness in plague proportions that mars our sense of prosperity and well being; and the third is the unpredictable impact on the earth and all creatures of Global Warming and other dramatic impacts on the living, inter-connected world. Only when we understand the connection between these health threats and our environment, only when we fully grasp the link between health, knowledge and empowerment, can we promote a successful strategy to meet all three major threats.**

**It is time to shape a national health strategy that recognizes that all of our children face a life expectancy shorter than their parents, a rare generational reversal, unless we deal with all three of these health threats. The illnesses that are reducing Aboriginal life expectancy to somewhere between eleven and twenty years less than the rest of Australians are the same life style illnesses that most likely will take everyone. My children are facing the same major health threats as your children. We need a national health strategy that is built on a clear sense of wellness and vitality, using education and prevention rather than surrendering to the gathering storm clouds of a great national sickness.**

**There is a genuine health emergency in the heartland of this country and it is not the one dealt with by the Northern Territory Intervention. Every Elder I know is grieving because so many young people, alienated and feeling there is no place for them in their own land, are taking their lives. Those hanging themselves, grabbing a rifle or throwing themselves onto electric wires are deeply traumatized. It is a cross generational trauma, a mental illness or overwhelming sorrow that threatens obliteration.**

If the mental sickness does not destroy these young people, then physical illness threatens to do it by their thirties or forties. You've heard it again and again, what will kill most people in East Arnhem Land is the plague of chronic illness, the diabetes, renal disease, strokes, hypertension, heart disease and cancer. Together they form a deadly cluster that has been cutting the heart out of several generations of Indigenous people. Many die with three or four of these chronic illnesses. The plague has been accelerating for the past fifteen years and is now, without doubt, the greatest threat to Aboriginal Culture since the arrival of European borne illnesses over two centuries ago.

**But I want you to think deeply about the key factor underlying this plague of chronic illness. It is preventable.**

A research team from Monash University, the University of Mississippi and the Menzies School of Health in the Northern Territory found that a fascinating constant across many different people who had died of these chronic illnesses and that was that they had been born a dangerously low birth weight baby. Deprived of good nutrition the baby's tiny kidney was developing too few nephrons, the tiny filters. With too few nephrons your kidney struggles to compensate and that leads to early illness. So here is the truth! It is not about the colour of the mother's skin because this pattern can affect every child. The truth is that young mother's malnutrition, untreated infections, smoking, drinking and lack of life-skills education load her up with great risk. Her baby, even in utero, is programmed for early onset, life threatening illness.

When about 70% of our health is shaped by our socio-economic environment, the home we live in, our education, employment and ability to access primary health care, it should be perfectly clear why some people are about five times sicker than the rest. Health is just one of the human rights we have never delivered to the children of East Arnhem Land.

We owe them all the truth. Instead of frightening and stereotyping people with the Big Lies of the Intervention, we need to focus on the life empowering knowledge and the genuine community control that allows families, especially children, to be part of and feel good about taking the steps towards better health and well being.

We must sit down with our children and explain that each one of has a great power because we can decide life and death. Every valuable extra year of education that we can add to a whole community of teenage girls, can eventually add up to four years to the life expectancy of their first babies. The Noongar scholar and now Federal Member of Parliament, Ken Wyatt, adds that for every additional year of education we can also reduce the risk of Aboriginal infant mortality by seven to ten per cent.

Can there be any greater incentive for each one of us? Is any knowledge more important than ensuring that girls and boys understand it is not being black, or brown, or white, we are all brothers and sisters and we all must share the knowledge and power that lets a child live.

**Alcohol is Australia's most socially damaging drug and as it is legal enormous amounts of money are vested in the status quo....that means keeping people addicted to a binge drinking habit. If it took centuries to educate people about the massive health damage caused by smoking we can assume it will be a very long effort in health promotion to move a majority of Australians towards other enlightened action.**

**It is not popular with many Australians but most research on alcohol abuse indicates that the most effective way to ease damage to families is to tax the higher alcoholic content drinks and to restrict the flow of alcohol at retail outlets. Notice I did not mention prohibition like the kind dished out under the NT INTERVENTION.**

**Fiddling with Intervention style prohibition has never worked anywhere in the world. Turning off the grog tap for some part of the day, some days of the week, must be equitable and non-discriminatory. Only when we see face up as a nation to Australia's widespread binge-drinking habit can we hope to kick the habit.**

**Isn't enlightenment the key? Enlightenment means knowledge and community control.**

**To understand the way forward all Australian children must know that they will have a shorter life expectancy than their parents and possibly far more pain in their life... unless they use their heads. I see young people who make this discovery as the happiest and healthiest in the world.**

**Instead of dramatizing death and disease, instead of prohibition and welfare quarantine cards, we need an incentive based approach that empowers, involves and rewards young Australians for developing life-skills and putting their life force in balance.**

**For instance, giving the children of east Arnhem Land the opportunity to attend federally funded school camps for all kids could focus on the obesity epidemic, an understanding of nutrition and the connection between life style and life expectancy. Music and sport can play a big part in such camps and the AIME program I have spoken about is stressing all of these things can turn on young people to a better way to live.**

**Schools that value life-skills education as much as other essential knowledge will see healthier children who learn more about everything. Yes, the young always think they are indestructible and this is partly a rite of passage. But the indulgence of our over-indulged generation has set a very poor example. Our emphasis on a relentless quest for materialism is linked with an appetite, perhaps an addiction, to a very damaging diet and behaviour**

**Don't expect health campaigns about smoking, alcohol, other drugs or risky social behaviour to have any dramatic effect while our society at large is essentially out of kilter. Food manufacturers and governments must recognize that we need to change the relentless marketing of a junk food lifestyle that can only pile life after life onto the human junk heap when this is so unnecessary.**

**We do need a national effort to find our life force, to live well, to understand that the mind and the body must be trained and fine tuned to give us the greatest capacity for good and happiness.**

**It is finding that belief as a nation that all of our children have the right to health and education, seeing that as our most important national goal, and knowing that when that day comes we can truly say that we have built a great society for all.**

**Surely what we need to think carefully about is the *wisdom of the elders*.**

**Aboriginal people have always prized knowledge of the inter-connectedness of all life and a deep understanding of the functional environment. Bound by Culture and material needs this has developed reciprocity, rules and constraints that have looked after the land for longer than anyone really knows.**

**Just like modern earth science, the world's oldest knowledge system looks to the long-term well being of our species and other creatures in our extraordinary living system.**

**The driving principle of enlightened Custodianship is not *maximum production*, but *maximum sustained yield for all generations to come*.**

**We must act wisely now for future generations to exist.**

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