

## **NETWORK OF ABORIGINAL LANGUAGE CENTRES**

### **Submission on the Draft State Sustainability Strategy**

Language Centres throughout Western Australia are working to maintain, preserve and revitalise indigenous languages. The sustainability of indigenous language, culture and knowledge is a priority amongst indigenous communities who are employing a number of strategies to achieve this aim. The State Sustainability Strategy refers to the sustainability of cultural heritage yet does not specifically mention indigenous languages. The Australia State of the Environment Report (2001, p.1) states that language is ‘one of the most significant aspects of the cultural heritage of any group’ (Australia State of the Environment Report 2001, p.1), and we therefore call on the WA Government to recognise the importance of indigenous languages to all Australians and support communities working towards their sustainability.

There are a number of benefits associated with ensuring the sustainability of indigenous languages:

- Preserving cultural and linguistic diversity which is recognised as having ‘enormous social and economic benefits’ (Language Services Policy, p.1)
- Maintaining and enhancing a sense of identity and pride amongst young indigenous people
- Increasing awareness and understanding of indigenous heritage amongst the wider community which in turn can lead to reconciliation between indigenous and non-indigenous people

Continued maintenance of indigenous languages will also present a number of opportunities:

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- Indigenous languages represent a great storehouse of knowledge and tradition about the environment, which can assist in land management planning and contribute towards environmental sustainability
- Indigenous language speakers are beginning to realise employment opportunities as interpreters, language teachers, tour guides, cultural and environmental informants.
- Indigenous language and culture is a major drawcard for visitors to remote areas of Australia from interstate and overseas, and presents a number of opportunities for economic activity within the tourism sector

All levels of government have a responsibility to the indigenous population to support their efforts at maintaining traditional language and culture. At the federal level, ATSIC provides the main operational funds for the ongoing activities of language centres. These funding levels have remained the same for six years and now need to be increased in line with rising operating costs and the added expense related to remote areas. State government is currently supporting language maintenance through funding of Kimberley Interpreting Service and provision of specific grant money through the Department of Indigenous Affairs. Language Centres often have to develop innovative projects to access other state funding as it is made available. An ongoing commitment from the State is necessary to ensure projects can continue into the long term rather than relying on short term or 'quick-fix' solutions. Local government does not, to my knowledge make a significant contribution to language or cultural maintenance activities.

Partnerships between business and indigenous communities are being formed to encourage the promotion of indigenous languages and the use of interpreters. In particular, the resource sector has supported a number of projects involving Kimberley Interpreting Service and cultural festivities, such as NAIDOC Week. These partnerships need to be expanded and could include tour operators, broadcasting, and philanthropic institutions.

Members of indigenous communities already participate to a great extent in language maintenance activities. Elderly speakers are language informants and/or committee members, younger people are being trained as language workers, language teachers or interpreters, and all ages participate in cultural performances and awareness raising

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events. The non-indigenous community has an obligation to respect indigenous language speakers and encourage and promote the use of traditional language in their community. This could be through the use of traditional place names, support for indigenous language programs in schools, and increasing awareness of local language issues

There are a number of Best Practice examples in Western Australia that demonstrate how the sustainability of indigenous languages is being progressed:

### **Kununurra**

Mirima Dawang Woorlab-gerring, Language and Culture Centre (MDWG) carries out a number of language maintenance activities including, language teaching in schools, broadcasting language on local radio, recording arts documentation, producing books, videos and computer resources, and maintaining a language archive. Young adults are trained in language studies and work with the community to carry out the activities listed above. In particular, in 2001 MDWG produced a video documenting Gajirrawoong language and country. Gajirrawoong has been identified as an endangered language and this video has become the main resource used to expose young people to this dying language. Since the production of the video, many people have returned to visit the places highlighted in the film, and a young Gajirrawoong man is now focusing solely on Gajirrawoong language in his work at the Language Centre.

### **KLRC**

The Kimberley Language Resource Centre (KLRC) was established in 1985 to provide a forum for Aboriginal people in the Kimberley Region to make decisions about language policy and to help Aboriginal people work on their own languages. These aims are realised through linguistic fieldwork and analysis, oral recordings, production of grammars, wordbooks, phrase books, audiotapes, videotapes and CD-ROMs. Day to day use of language is promoted through the teaching and use of languages in schools and community-based situations.

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### **East Kimberley - Plants and Animals Project**

The KLRC are collaborating with the KLC on the Ord Bonaparte Program. This is a research program looking at the Ord River and the land around it. The KLC manages the Aboriginal Planning and Management for Country Program. The overall aim of this program is to bring together Aboriginal knowledge about land management practices with Western scientific knowledge and, to understand how the country has changed over time. The KLRC plays an important role in recording information from speakers of the local languages about plants, animals and cultural and ecological knowledge. Because of the unbreakable link between Aboriginal languages and culture it is important that this knowledge about land management is passed on to the younger generations in linguistic contexts.

### **Fitzroy Crossing - Language teaching**

The KLRC has a role to play in encouraging and supporting Aboriginal community requests to teach language in the schools. One successful language program is implemented at Fitzroy Crossing by the KLRC's Senior Language Development Officer a Bunuba speaker. The success of the program is based on her long-standing connection with the KLRC and her work with the project linguists. Over time she has extended and developed her linguistic knowledge of Bunuba to a level that is influencing the content and teaching methods of her language lessons. There has been noticeable success over the last 5 years in raising the profile of Bunuba. Most significant is the use of Bunuba by the younger generations.

### **Wangka Maya Pilbara Aboriginal Language Centre.**

Wangka Maya's Vision Statement is "Wangka Maya Pilbara Aboriginal Language Centre aims to be recognised as a leading Aboriginal language and resource centre in Australia. By working with the old people of the Pilbara, we will use our expertise, knowledge and sensitivity to record and foster Aboriginal languages, culture and history. Thus, ensuring the young people remain strong."

Wangka Maya has developed a Strategic Plan to meet the Objectives underlying the Vision Statement. Areas included are

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Languages

- Ensure, where possible, there is a language database, a grammar and recorded stories for each of the Pilbara's 30 Aboriginal languages.
- Develop an extensive filing system of all research done on Pilbara languages and have copies of all Pilbara materials available at Wangka Maya.
- Develop resources that may be used for language maintenance programs. For example wordlists, dictionaries, charts, tapes, books, videos, CDs.
- Support language usage through offering translating services, identifying interpreters for other organisations, and being involved in the language segment of the local radio station.

#### Culture

- Coordinate the restitution of sacred objects and skeletal remains from institutions around Australia back to the Pilbara.
- Provide Cultural Awareness Programs to individuals and institutions of the Pilbara.
- Provide a Link Up service to the Stolen Generations of the Pilbara.

#### History

- Record Elders in traditional languages and Aboriginal English.
- Produce books based upon these oral histories.

One example of the many projects to achieve our Objectives is a cooperative effort supported by a grant from AIATSIS. Wangka Maya is developing a database for Warnman, a Western Desert language with less than 100 speakers left. From this will be produced a dictionary of Warnman and a sketch grammar. The database will also allow for automatic interlinear glossing, which will make the further study of grammar and translation into English a much easier process.

Another example is the publishing of a book of over 60 songs from the Ngarla language in both Ngarla and English. There are less than 10 fluent speakers of Ngarla left. These

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songs encapsulate both the history of the region, and the perspective and culture of the Ngarla people.

### **Yamaji Language Centre**

The Yamaji Language Centre (YLC) first began operating in 1989 as the Yamaji Language Project. It's role is to retrieve, preserve, maintain and promote Indigenous languages and culture of the region . The Language Centre provides support for families and communities who want to undertake their own language and culture activities. Further to this, the Language Centre offers training and employment opportunities for Yamaji people to become language workers in their communities.

To date a Wajarri wordlist, tape and sketch grammar have been produced, a wordlist for the Nhanda language and soon to be published a Malgana wordlist. A data base has been developed for both Wajarri and Badimaya, and from this dictionaries of both languages, and a sketch grammar of Badimaya will be produced. Further research into other languages of the region is ongoing.

The Yamaji Language Centre runs a publishing project, and 2001 saw the publication of 'Copperwire George', the life story of George Latham and in 2002 'Wajarri Wisdom' food and medicine plants of the Mullewa/Murchison region as used by the Wajarri people. This year, 2003 will see the publication of 'Waranygu Bayalgu'a bilingual bush-tucker book by Mrs Dora Dann, a Wajarri Elder. The YLC also helps to record and publish oral histories.

The YLC is the major resource for language and culture in the Yamaji region, and consequently is involved in many local and wider community projects, and consultations. Last year, the YLC was heavily involved in a permanent exhibition for the WA Museum in Geraldton depicting the history and heritage of the region from a Yamaji perspective. Traditional stories and songs in language, photographs, artefacts and testimonies were collected and are part of the mixed media display. The role of Yamaji women as workers on stations and as part of station life was also a focus, often neglected.

The YLC works closely with LOTE through the Education Department and offers active support and linguistic resources to schools in the region, and participates in ongoing training of LOTE teachers. It aims to raise awareness of language and cultural issues in

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the community through the Yamaji News newspaper, a publication affiliated with the  
Language Centre.

### **Kimberley Interpreting Service**

The Kimberley Interpreting Service (KIS) is an initiative of Mirima Dawang Woorlab-gerring, Language and Culture Centre with the support of Kimberley Language Resource Centre.

KIS is the only Aboriginal Interpreting Service in Western Australia, providing skilled, NAATI (National Accreditation Authority for Translators and Interpreters) accredited Aboriginal interpreters within WA, training new interpreters, and providing ongoing professional development. The Service provides an invaluable tool for the improvement of service delivery and communication within the Kimberley Region.

Through Kimberley Interpreting Service, indigenous language speakers are able to ensure their language is sustained into the future by using their first language in everyday situations and in situations when people may be under particular stress (such as in hospital and court). In this way employment opportunities are realised and language differences cease to be a barrier between the indigenous and non-indigenous population.

More work needs to be done in the research and development area to ensure effective language planning can be carried out. The data on indigenous languages collected in the past by non-linguists are notoriously inaccurate, with surveys and questionnaires often not taking into account the fact that the respondents do not speak English as their first language. Census data are unreliable for this reason, and language centres often have to rely on educated estimates based on local linguistic knowledge to plan language maintenance strategies and allocate resources.

Western Australia has a great wealth of indigenous languages and cultures and has a responsibility to ensure their sustainability on behalf of all Australians. On a regional and global level, WA could develop best practice examples of heritage sustainability,

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economic enterprises, traditional land management techniques, and strong communities  
through their diversity.

## **References**

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