

Networking for Critical Mass:

The West Coast Aboriginal Network (WestCAN) Case Study

Debra Fernando, Joan Gibbs, Frances Wyld and
Fay Rola-Rubzen

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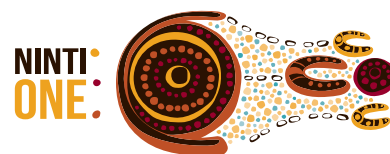
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Debra Fernando, Joan Gibbs, Frances Wyld and Fay Rola-Rubzen



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Executive summary

This report highlights an action-research case study of the West Coast Aboriginal Network (WestCAN). The network was first conceptualised in 2004 through the Plants for People project of the Desert Knowledge CRC (DKCRC). From this, community members banded together to form a network. Twenty-four people made up the core of the network. These people worked on enterprise projects within their communities. The network provides a support mechanism enabling people with common interest to be encouraged by providing a range of information and resources outside their communities. At the time of publication of this report the small to medium-sized enterprise (SME) members of WestCAN were:

- Pampul Therapy and Healing Wiru – Patricia and Zane Gunter family, 10 km east of Ceduna
- Scotdesco Espresso Cafe – the Scotdesco Community, 100 km west of Ceduna
- Minnie’s Outback Tours – Lerline Crisci at Scotdesco community
- Tjilkaba Gardens – Glenette Miller and the Scotdesco community
- Cultural Awareness Training – Wanda Miller at Scotdesco community
- Wanda’s Bush Medicine – Wanda Miller at Scotdesco community
- Koonibba Internet Cafe – with John Thomas at Koonibba community, 35 km west of Ceduna
- Koonibba Nursery – contract growing with Peter Gray at Koonibba community
- Dinahline Bushfood Gardens – Dinahline Homeland community, 5 km west of Ceduna

The focus of this research was to observe, monitor and facilitate where necessary the businesses’ development through time. The research aimed to understand the challenges faced by aspiring Aboriginal entrepreneurs in desert areas (and why a networking approach might be a successful one), issues associated with start-up, the role of external facilitation, and forming a network and impacts on individuals and the group as a whole.

The lessons learned from the case study include:

- Desert country is the familiar resource that supports and inspires the people, so any business must be harmonious with the desert community, the lifestyle and the land.
- A network approach is likely to be successful because the group’s approach is in line with Aboriginal culture, which encompasses group encouragement, family support and sharing ideas and labour, similar to a large corporation.
- The overarching principle is that the people developing the business need ownership of the ideas and the process if the business is to grow and survive long-term.
- A small amount of external facilitation is often all that is needed to develop viable businesses. The people of the Network had most of the necessary skills, knowledge and ability even before the project began but they lacked the confidence and coordination to initiate enterprises that could sustain the cultural lifestyle for the long term.
- The network model of community development (Cheers et al. 2007) brought together long-separated relatives and Aboriginal communities, for common goals and sharing strengths.
- A field liaison-coordinator person was vital for starting up the Network, facilitating meetings and focus group research, organising capacity-building workshops and encouraging the feeling of empowerment for remote Aboriginal communities.
- The role of TAFE in providing training and confidence building must be acknowledged and appreciated.
- Several funding agencies provided the pivotal support that facilitated the important workshops to develop confidence and coordination, such as: developing business plans (Indigenous Business Australia and WestCAN project officer); the acquisition of water at Scotdesco (Australian Government Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry); Business Showcase and other conferences (DKCRC); the employment program (Community Development Employment Project); and Assets Analysis & Community Building (Lumbu Indigenous Community Foundation and the Australian Government’s Building Healthy Communities).

- ‘Indigenist’ research methodologies were used to provide culturally appropriate research within Aboriginal communities and to write research reports about Aboriginal people.

The barriers to developing Aboriginal SMEs in the Ceduna area are as follows:

- The difficulty of finding business ideas that fit the cultural lifestyle of Aboriginal people.
- The mistaken expectation that business planning and the profit motive will sustain and perpetuate Aboriginal SMEs.
- The incompatibility between the cultural lifestyle and profit-only enterprises.
- The time and effort required to maintain the social fabric of families and relatives, which is a pre-requisite for Aboriginal SMEs in desert communities.
- The extraordinary amount of grief and death resulting from social and financial disadvantage.
- The reluctance of some individuals to conduct business on-line or in public, or commit to regular hours.

Working through the barriers has demonstrated the special techniques and resources used by Aboriginal groups: the Elders, problem-solving techniques, capacity development, encouragement, confidence building, positive reinforcement, skills training and development, and opening the businesses to the wider community.

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List of shortened forms

ABN	Australian Business Number
CDEP	Community Development Employment Project
DKCRC	Desert Knowledge Cooperative Research Centre
ERDB	Eyre Regional Development Board
IBA	Indigenous Business Australia
SME	small to medium-sized enterprise
TAFE	tertiary and further education
WestCAN	West Coast Aboriginal Network

1. Introduction

We would like to introduce this project through the words of a Wirungu Elder:

Believe in the future

The government has gone backwards in providing services that are culturally appropriate to Aboriginal people; we must look to develop our own future. We as individuals need to be making sure that our people get good education and training, so that we have the tools to build an economical future for the survival of our people and our culture.

It is an exciting time in our area; never before have we had so much interest in development and mining. We are now being consulted and are able to negotiate positive outcomes in the economical development in many areas such as in training, employment and job opportunities.

Sure we must acknowledge the past in order to move forward but we must also grab every opportunity to improve our general wellbeing and lifestyle, because if you dwell too much in the past, you miss the opportunities that can carry you into the future.

We must give encouragement by being positive role models, mentoring and supporting our youth to become our future leaders, assisting in developing their self esteem helping them to become strong in their culture. Instil pride in our youth in regards to our culture and learning about family connections. We need to take time out to reconnect with our culture and our families, everyone working together, with the elders interacting and supporting the youth and the listening to the elders and both sharing knowledge.

We must continue to rise to the challenges of the changes around us and be strong in keeping our culture alive.

We cannot forget our culture. It is not in the past, it is a living culture, it is a part of us, it is our identity, our strength, and who we are.

Thank you for this honour.

Wanda Miller (2006), Aboriginal Community Elder, Native title representative, NAIDOC speech

The researchers start the report with this quote from Wanda Miller because this is the framework the project is situated upon. Every day, community people are affected by a number of challenges that influence business opportunities and affect business development.

Leaders in the communities work with the challenges to do whatever they can to improve or lessen impacts on projects and community members. The project was designed to enhance the methods of working through barriers that affect the success of businesses on the community. We also look to inspire Aboriginal people to look to the future to give their grandchildren and their children a better life, as did the people that went before them.

Several processes were used by the researchers to overcome or deal with the many things that affect the community. These processes include:

- consulting with Elders
- problem-solving techniques
- capacity development
- encouragement
- confidence building
- positive reinforcement
- training and development of skills
- supporting and facilitating the process of opening their business to the wider community

Importantly, all individuals, communities and researchers involved were considered partners in the research.

2. Background

The Desert Knowledge CRC Desert Biz™ Far West Coast case study grew out of the Desert Knowledge CRC Plants for People network located within the same region and involving some of the same participants. Plants for People began phase 1 in 2004 and concluded phase 2 in 2005. Future directions predicted at its completion included:

- the establishment of identity and momentum for the West Coast Aboriginal Network
- use of strengths such as cohesion, mutual support, positive interaction and variety of membership and business ideas
- further capacity development within membership
- further business growth
- the need to seek further funding opportunities.

Further study was recommended and a case study under DKCRC's core project 3, DesertBiz™, was established. Phase 1 began in November 2006.

3. Networking and critical mass

One of the challenges faced by desert communities is the lack of critical mass. Critical mass refers to the smallest number of people or things required to make something happen (Macmillan Publishers 2009, Stafford Smith 2008). Lack of critical mass hinders people to start a business or make businesses profitable and sustainable.

One strategy to deal with lack of critical mass is through networking.

Networking is a process of establishing contacts or relationships. Networking provides access to new businesses, information to new opportunities, additional marketing channels as well as strategic alliances in specific markets. It also provides an avenue to develop opportunities for collaboration (De Klerk & Kroon 2008).

According to Zhao and Aram (1995), networks are akin to sets of interconnected organisations. A personal network can help an entrepreneur achieve business success. Aside from allowing an entrepreneur to create new ventures, a network helps in meeting challenges in a complex business environment and promotes entrepreneurial action (Johannisson 1988). Studies have found that enterprises with strong networking capabilities survive the dynamic business environment and influence the creation of new innovations as well as product developments (Möller & Svahn 2009).

Networks can be formal or informal. Among others, formal networks may include banks, accountants, lawyers, local governments, chambers of commerce, realtors and small business units, while informal networks may include business contacts, family members, friends and colleagues. Both have an important role to play. Informal networks help assemble business resources while formal networks support the raising of funds to finance businesses (Birley 1985).

Networks extend the asset base of entrepreneurs in the form of human, social, market, financial as well as technical capacity (Jack et al. 2008). Networking can help entrepreneurs gain access to information, opportunities or other resources as well as improve market reach. Successful networking provides access to opportunities and business support (De Klerk & Kroon 2008). Furthermore, business networks help improve efficiency and social welfare (Parker 2008).

A review of network-based research in entrepreneurship by Hoang and Antoncic (2003) identified three components of networks. These included content of the relationships, governance of relationships, and structure or pattern from the crosscutting ties. In terms of content, the relationships were viewed as a means of gaining access to resources. Networks were beneficial in providing access

to information and advice. With governance, trust was found as important among partners and enhanced the quality of resource flows. On the other hand, network structure was defined as the pattern of relationships that are engendered from the direct and indirect ties between actors. The success of a network however depends on several things. According to Finley (2008), successful networking requires establishing a personal connection and being genuinely interested to help others in the network. It is also critical to be an active member or take an active role in the network to make the most of the opportunities and to sustain the network.

4. Objectives

The project aimed to achieve the following:

- Audit and analyse the impact of the West Coast Aboriginal Network.
- Support the network in identifying new business opportunities.
- Support the network in sourcing potential funding to further business.
- Facilitate capacity-building workshops.
- Communicate the findings through discussion papers and participation in workshops and conferences.
- Report on the effectiveness of the West Coast Aboriginal Network.

5. Methodology

The methodology used for this project was action research, chosen for its participatory and emancipatory nature. Action research has been described as ‘the application of fact-finding to practical problem-solving in a social situation with a view to improving the quality of action within it’ (Burns 2000, p.443). Reason and Bradbury (2002, p. 2) say:

A primary purpose of action research is to produce practical knowledge that is useful to people in the everyday conduct of their lives. A wider purpose of action research is to contribute through this practical knowledge to the increased well being – economic, political, psychological, spiritual – of human persons and communities, and to a more equitable and sustainable relationship with the wider ecology of the planet of which we are an intrinsic part.

The case study also made use of an in situ researcher who also acted as project officer and community liaison. This was a key part of the project design, which sought not to impose decision making from the outside (recommended by Tacchi et al. 2003 as good action research). The in situ researcher also worked towards helping community members develop their capacity.

Indigenous research methodologies were also used in the case study. Aboriginal academics have called for the development of a methodology that empowers and is in part situated within an Aboriginal framework to understand Aboriginal social systems. Martin (2001) quotes Rigney (1999) as one of the leaders in developing an ‘Indigenist’ research methodology. Work within qualitative research in the last 10 years has allowed this methodology to emerge (Denzin & Lincoln 2000); it has allowed disempowered voices to not only be heard but to actively be involved in research.

6. The Far West Coast Aboriginal Network (WestCAN)

The West Coast Aboriginal Network (WestCAN) is located 800 km west of Adelaide in the remote area of the far west coast of South Australia. Currently there are four major settlements that make up the local network: Ceduna, Koonibba, Dinahline and Scotdesco. Ceduna has a population of 4000 people, 28% of whom are of Aboriginal descent. Dinahline Aboriginal community homeland is located 10 km west of Ceduna and has a population of approximately 30 people. Koonibba Aboriginal Community is a discrete remote Aboriginal Community of 100–150 people some 35 km west of

Ceduna, off the Eyre Highway. Scotdesco is a remote Aboriginal community homeland approximately 120 km west of Ceduna with a population of 50 permanent residents living on the farming community.

The network was first conceptualised in 2004 through the Plants for People project of the Desert Knowledge CRC. From this, community members banded together to form a network. There are 24 people that make up the core of the network. These people are working on enterprise projects within their communities. The network provides a support mechanism enabling people with common interest to be encouraged by providing a range of information and resources outside their communities.

A key point of the network is that the people that are doing the work are the people that are creating the network. Forming a network gives support to people who are the only ones in a community starting a business. The network has a number of roles and responsibilities, including to:

- support and encourage all Aboriginal people within the region who are wishing to get into business
- enhance and develop businesses
- provide or seek out necessary training or skills updating
- provide a safe working space for people to build their capacity.

WestCAN enables a group of people to work together in sharing ideas, supporting each other as well as encouraging each other. The group is made up of individuals and distinct communities. This ability to encompass mixed modalities of forming businesses dispels the thought that successful Aboriginal entrepreneurship needs to come from both an individual and community origin (Foley 2006).

During the course of the project, several businesses were formed by WestCAN members. Outlined below are their stories on the development of their desert businesses.

6.1 Ceduna: Patricia Gunter

Patricia and her family had the idea for a business a few years before becoming involved with the DKCRC's research in March 2005. The project officer met with Patricia to talk about the research. Patricia was informed about the different business support organisations that were available for Aboriginal Australians and the assistance that they may be able to offer her in establishing her business. Patricia stated that she had some contact with the Eyre Regional Development Board (ERDB) some years ago when she first thought of the business, but had not followed through with this.

Patricia rang and made an appointment to see the ERDB in Port Lincoln. After the appointment in Port Lincoln, ERDB visited Patricia at her home for further development discussions. Patricia showed the WestCAN project officer her draft business plans and brainstorming ideas. Patricia stated that the ERDB officer would catch up with her next time the Gunters were in Ceduna. Apparently they promised to support her in developing a business plan and assisting in registering her business, as well as providing a number of equipment options for her business.

Patricia and the WestCAN project officer worked together on other parts of her business, looking at training needs and other business support. After three months without hearing from ERDB, Patricia asked for assistance to find out what was going on with ERDB and the availability of support that was agreed upon. Contacting ERDB, it sounded as though there was a lack of communication or a misunderstanding in communication. Advocating on Patricia's behalf, the WestCAN project officer arranged a meeting with ERDB and Patricia again. ERDB met with Patricia to clear up the matter. ERDB visited the Ceduna area every two weeks. After communication issues were resolved, Patricia did not see ERDB for another four months. The WestCAN project officer then spoke with IBA, which contracted ERDB to work with Patricia on the development of her business plan.

In March 2006, Patricia's business plan was completed and a grant application was also submitted for Patricia to work from the Women's Centre in Ceduna, but again there seemed to be a misunderstanding about Patricia's ideas and the ERDB's input. Patricia thought that she would be running her business from the Women's Centre, while the ERDB put in for funding for Patricia to access top-up wages apart from CDEP to work from the Women's Centre as an employee. Patricia then asked if the WestCAN project officer could take an advocating role to speak with the ERDB and the Women's Centre.



Patricia Gunter

Patricia and the WestCAN project officer continued to work on other areas of her business, such as administration support, which Patricia identified as an area in which she would need a lot of support. Patricia also identified the need for training in plant propagation, business development, natural theory massages, and massage sessions in Adelaide with the assistance of Joan Gibbs and cosmetics training. Patricia has completed most of the training that was identified. She has received a certificate of attendance in business development, attended a week-long training course in natural theory massages in Melbourne, presented three massage sessions in Adelaide and attended two soap and cosmetics training courses.

Since working with Patricia we have looked at personal skills development and business development. Major activities that are associated with the advancement of Patricia's business are:

- finding suitable business support
- family commitments
- finding suitable training locally
- establishing community support outside the network
- marketing her products
- use of technology marketing.

The time spent with the bureaucratic process that some Aboriginal people such as Patricia have to go through has held up the process of establishing her business. From the first contact she had with business support organisations, it has taken over 12 months to have a business plan done and training provided. Over the time the project officer has worked with Patricia it has sometimes been hard to keep her in high spirits to continue her business. There were times when she wanted to give up because she felt that it was all too hard. By providing support through motivation, encouragement and training as well as having the support of the network, Patricia has been able to continue her journey in establishing her business.

Patricia's business is now registered, she has produced a logo and labelling for her products, she has done a number of massage theory sessions in Adelaide, her business has gained the support of the Port Lincoln Health Service, the Women's Centre in Ceduna, and the Koonibba Women's Centre. Patricia has a small regular client base in Ceduna – both non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal people. She is now looking at further direction for next year such as mentoring the youth groups in the far west region teaching them how to make soaps from native bush plants.

6.2 Scotdesco community

Scotdesco is a community approximately 100 km from Ceduna. There are approximately 30–50 residents in the community. Currently, agriculture, farming and CDEP payments are their main sources of income.

Scotdesco community wishes to develop an alternative farming industry which is sustainable and viable to the community, generating economic resources for the members through the farming of native bush foods and remedies, and cultural awareness training and tourism.

The development of native bush food and medicines will also advance the social health and wellbeing of the community. Associated with the native bush foods business will be a market garden supplying a nutritional food source to a remote community where members have to travel 100 km to buy fresh food.

Water and power is one of the main issues around farming native bush foods and remedies to establish a sustainable native bush farm. A bore or water catchment will need to be explored, a bore case and piping to the farming area will need to be established, and other water catchment materials and an irrigation system will also be required.

Issues that have been most prominent are the lack of good water to use for an irrigation system. Social issues also impact on community advancement. This in turn impacts on the availability of workers to assist in the production of products. The lack of government support has also been an issue until lately. However, with the change of federal government there has been an influx of funds that the community was able to tap into to assist the momentum of business development. The following are some of the businesses that have been developing in Scotdesco since the commencement of the project.

6.2.1 Cultural awareness

Wanda Miller has developed her cultural awareness package with the assistance of WestCAN and DesertBiz™ without government funds or other outside sources. She is now working with Iluka Mining to present workshops to all their workers situated in the area. Wanda is also working with the Yalata community on cultural awareness training with staff. Wanda is in the process of developing a business plan.

Some fledgling Aboriginal businesses do not see the necessity of a business plan until a point in their business where they can see concrete proof that an operation can be viable. Wanda stated that she was becoming overwhelmed with the amount of interest she has in her business and is not sure how to deal with the requests. We then entered into the development of a plan to help her go through this journey of setting up a business and managing it. It is at this point that the business plan becomes real and answers to the question of ‘How do I start?’ fall into place.



Wanda Miller

6.2.2 Cultural tourism

Lerline Crisci, another resident of Scotdesco and participant in the study, was interested in developing a cultural tourism experience. The first cultural tour was established in 2007 with the support of Desert Knowledge CRC’s DesertBiz™ project team. Lerline’s story is all about timing, which is a key aspect

of the other businesses in the network. Business success is based around the capacity of the individual and the confidence of the person to present their business; the most difficult thing is to bring that person's confidence level up. Lerline has a good understanding of the theory, having gained a Certificate 4 in Tourism.

Lerline has developed a sense of business and is now reinvesting the funds that she received for her tour back into the business, using it to purchase materials for her tours. Like Wanda Miller, she has not had any government funding apart from the CDEP activities budget. Lerline is approaching the point of developing a business plan. One of the mechanisms needed for supporting Aboriginal businesses is to know when to introduce the next step of a business so that it is a logical and understood process of business development.



A group participating in cultural tourism

6.2.3 Native bush foods: Tjilkaba Garden

Activities within Tjilkaba Garden have fluctuated. Lack of water was a major barrier, as well as support from community members. But the trials of growing plants was very successful and the community are aware of how they can create a community garden and produce products for wild harvest, such as native grape jams and coffee. In the future, this can be a value-added product to a tourism business.



Scotdesco community

6.2.4 Scotdesco Espresso Cafe

Scotdesco community purchased a coffee machine and is now in the process of receiving funding from government to have a roadside café where it can sell some of its products. Resourcing the coffee machine was a little unconventional but it worked and the government is now noticing this. The government is now taking an interest in the garden as well, and is supporting equipment.

The Scotdesco Espresso Café has turned out to be a very successful business idea, with some of the young women engaging in hospitality courses. A thriving catering business has emerged and is advertised on the Scotdesco web site: <http://www.scotdesco.com/scotdesco/cafe.htm>.

The café was initiated at the community level and included some key factors for success. This includes capacity development through training support within the community, which built motivation, confidence and critical mass and excellent timing. This venture was community driven and much of its success can be attributed the community's vision and hard work.

6.3 Dinahline

Dinahline is a small Aboriginal homeland of 25–30 people, 10 km west of Ceduna, off the Eyre Highway. This community has an established bush foods garden selling the produce to a company in South Australia.

The community is within the boundary of the District Council of Ceduna but receives only limited municipal services from the council. Dinahline has a market garden which is a community owned business. The Dinahline community is keen to expand the business venture. They would like to produce native bush foods products and expand their current business to create full-time employment for Aboriginal people in the region. The community would like to extend the market garden to sell all their products to the local Ceduna community and surrounding areas. The aspirations and achievements of Dinahline are of great credit to the community.

Over the past years the bush foods gardens have been functioning with little or no external support. Dinahline has produced bush plants (desert raisins and bush bananas) for a company that processes bush food. Apart from this, they have no access to the national market.

The main challenges the community faced have been similar over the years. These include:

- limited access to the national market
- fixed price received for their bush produce (i.e. they have been producing the products for the same price of \$20 per kilo for both the desert raisins and the bush bananas; market prices have been fluctuating and have been known to reach about \$45 per kilo yet, due to their contract, they are unable to take advantage of higher market prices)
- the work involved with maintaining the gardens is labour intensive
- workers only get CDEP wages
- external community politics
- members being unable to access other CDEP participants
- lack of business support
- no identifiable business future planning
- no access to equipment to produce products from the fruit
- lack of water, which can be critical at some parts of the year
- the business not generating enough funds to pay expenses.



The garden at Dinahline

These issues have created a heavy burden on the workers. While the workers did not expect to make any money in the first five years, because of these issues they find it very hard to create a business when the business is owned by the community. Changes in community leaders influenced business expectations even though the workers did not get any extra resources to work on the business and to care for the plants.

Unable to access other workers from the CDEP program in Ceduna, the workload became intense for the few that worked in the business at Dinahline. The community discussed with the WestCAN project officer many times about producing their own bush products; however, they were unable to find the

resources. Applications for funds to establish a cooking area were declined. There was also a concern about where to find the workers.

Unfortunately the workers have become tired of working four to seven days a week and harvesting over the Christmas breaks with no financial assistance. In addition to this, community politics pressurised workers to start retraining in other areas and work in other fields of CDEP employment. Speaking with the workers, they expressed that they would love to go back to work producing bush food but that this will not happen until the politics are over.

6.4 Koonibba

The Koonibba Aboriginal Community is a discrete and remote Aboriginal Community of 100–150 people some 35 km west of Ceduna, off the Eyre Highway. The Koonibba Community is situated on 5000 ha of land. The community has recently renewed a contract with neighbouring farmers to share-farm some 2500 ha of this land.

The community is within the boundary of the District Council of Ceduna but receives only limited municipal services from that council. Koonibba community established that to assist the development of the community they would like to build their business venture around the needs of the community. This would be done by having a market garden supplying native bush foods and remedies and western fruit and vegetables to the community. In addition they are keen to establish a native bush nursery for the purpose of local revegetation and sales to surrounding communities and government agencies.

The community has however faced a number of challenges that affected business development. The main challenges include:

- funerals/loss and grief
- social issues
- difficulty of maintaining the momentum/continuity
- loss of CDEP on the community
- lack of telecommunications
- transport.

Koonibba Community is the cornerstone for all communities in this region. A major issue that the community has to deal with is the amount of deaths that take place in Aboriginal communities. Being the cornerstone community, most people in the region are buried at Koonibba; hence, it is difficult for the community to maintain project momentum. The death of someone is often seen as the end, and the community has to deal with the loss and the grief that accompanies loss of a friend/ family/ community member. As the project officer noted, it appears that people are rebuilding their lives after a death.



One of the Koonibba greenhouses

These challenges impact on the business and the community. The loss of CDEP has also had a roll-on effect on all projects in the community. After some time and considerable expense the garden was disbanded, after being deemed by the government as a failed project. This has left the community feeling let down. Some community members now have to travel up to 60 km a day to go to work. This has been a source of disappointment for many as they feel that what they have started will now be left behind. This is even after the government has put a significant amount of funds into a project. The result was that the garden has not had a worker for three months and is seen as a failure, thus affecting community members. However, the community has rallied, demonstrating the resilience of Aboriginal people. After 10 deaths in the first eight months, and loss of CDEP, the community got back up. Now the workers have agreed to get the garden up again, with stronger support of other members in the community.

7. Project achievements and outputs

To determine the impact of the project on network members a focus group discussion was held on 21 August 2008 for participants to discuss project achievements, impacts and outputs. An extensive list of questions was discussed.

The feedback from focus group discussion participants was favourable, particularly on key areas such as knowledge sharing, confidence building and capacity building. The group's comment on the ability for 'sharing knowledge' was very positive, with some participants indicating that 'we are all getting support'. Some indicated that there was the opportunity for 'giving ideas, receiving ideas' and 'contact with businesses'. These enabled the group to develop 'confidence' and 'pride in ourselves'. Some were able to set goals such as to 'run our own business' and 'own our business (that is) a good one and be successful'. Family and support figured very strongly.

The project ran for approximately two years and participation in the study was maintained throughout. Most were satisfied with the mentoring support given by the project officer and the capacity building opportunities. 'Sharing knowledge' was another valuable part of the involvement through networking

with each other and the linkages to industry provided. Some community members also mentioned increased confidence that led to an ability to find their achievements. There was also recognition of the ability to earn money through ‘hard work’ and the importance of ‘marketing themselves’. Finally, members were satisfied with the level of community involvement.

The research team wish to acknowledge that the success of the different entrepreneurial activities have been community driven and therefore can be owned by them. The achievements noted by researchers include a sustained relationship between participants and the team that allowed good communication. The participants freely shared their stories, for which the team members thank them.

Some of the project’s outputs are listed below.

7.1 Development of new business opportunities

As discussed above, several businesses sprouted in the area as a result of the project. Many of the business opportunities were self-identified by each group based on possible markets and cultural knowledge. For example, cultural tourism grew out of visits to other tour operators, a desire to develop a business based on current resources, and enquires from interested tour participants. In this case a market was identified and trial tours took place before full-scale advertising on the Scotdesco website took place. Similarly, Patricia Gunter had been producing therapeutic goods using traditional knowledge and wanted to further develop her business.

In the case of the delivery of the cultural awareness training, an opportunity occurred and Wanda Miller – who has the knowledge and skills to deliver it – took on the opportunity. Initially, only a small market existed, but once Iluka Mining, which has an organisational policy requiring cultural awareness training for all its employees, moved into the area the opportunity for business was seized upon by Wanda Miller with the help of the project officer and the local TAFE staff.

The Scotdesco Café, the newest business, was an opportunity recognised by the community, researchers and other interested groups. However, the timing and access to resources had to be in place to guarantee success.

Other opportunities for business and livelihood were also recognised, such as growing plants to order at Koonibba and increasing production of bush foods at Dinahline. They will need the same amount of critical mass and opportunity as the other businesses. The recognition of the previous successes of others in the network will help build the momentum for these fledgling businesses and others that may emerge in future.

7.2 Development of business plans

Business plans have been developed by some businesses in the network in consultation with the project officer and Indigenous Business Australia. As mentioned in the descriptions of the case studies, business owners often need to see the development of the business to a certain stage before seeing the value in developing a business plan.

7.3 Capacity building workshops and visits

Many of the participants were given opportunities to visit other businesses or to participate in workshops.

One of the first visits was to Coorong in South Australia to see the successful operations of a tourism business. It also included a visit to the botanic gardens in Adelaide to learn about the propagation of native plants.



Visit to the University of South Australia

Sharing and exchange of knowledge also occurred. For instance, members of Scotdesco gave a workshop on irrigation as an example of sharing knowledge and the network supporting the network, a comment that was repeated several times within the focus group.

In addition, a smaller group was able to attend a workshop in Alice Springs and another to Port Lincoln. As mentioned previously, a group at Scotdesco participated in different training sessions for hospitality and tourism.

At Koonibba and Scotdesco two workshops were held in 2007 on information technology and the opportunities of marketing via the internet. Participants were then given the chance to attend training sessions later in the year.

7.4 Presentations and discussion papers

Members of both the research team and community were able to attend the Action Learning and Action Research Conference in Adelaide in 2007 as presenters and to display their products.

In 2008 the research team, with Patricia Gunter, attended the Desert Knowledge Symposium. The team presented with other members of the DesertBiz™ core project on ‘Networking towards critical mass on the Far West Coast of South Australia’ (Fernando et al. 2008). Patricia Gunter was also one of the speakers as part of a DKCRC panel at the International Association for Community Development conference in Brisbane in 2009.

7.5 Identification of more funding opportunities

The DesertBiz™ project team identified some funding opportunities and have applied for funding. Some were successful, including funding from the Department of Broadband Connection and the Digital Economy under the Backing Indigenous Ability program aimed at increasing information communication technology resources and awareness in remote Aboriginal communities.

The project was also able to fund part of the salary of the project officer through a community grant.

Participants themselves applied for other funding, such as Caring for Country, where Scotdesco was successful. Opportunities and suggestions have been made to WestCAN, which now has its own ABN and the ability to apply for and manage its own grants.

8. Key learnings from the project

The project found that a number of elements had to be in place for a business to become successful:

- The enterprise has to be self-driven and desired by the community or individual to guarantee long-term motivation.
- It is important to celebrate small successes to build momentum.
- Members need to participate and support each other in the network.
- Mentorship of a project officer/community developer is critical.
- Use of current knowledge, including traditional knowledge, can be a source of enterprise and can also provide a comfort zone.
- Believing in one's own capacity is important; the network members can support each other.
- The ability to access opportunities to access start-up funding is important when starting a business.
- The ability to promote the business through marketing is important in growing a business.
- Understanding that timing plays a key role and the ability to quickly take up opportunities.
- Ability to understand the market for your product is needed to respond to market needs.
- The ability to earn money is important for the sustainability of the business.
- To be listened to and heard by key stakeholders.

9. Summary

The DesertBiz™ core project of the Desert Knowledge CRC provided a focus and a timetable for the Network to work with and support business ideas for Aboriginal people in the far west coast of South Australia. During the project, from December 2006 to December 2009, nine SMEs began or experienced significant changes, which were audited and monitored by the Aboriginal researchers and the business owners. The methodology used was action research, for practical problem-solving with minimal outside interference. The aim was to allow the network participants to own, develop and resolve their own business issues, with minimal outside interference, while providing participatory and emancipatory action.

A series of capacity-building workshops were facilitated through the project research, which led to new business opportunities and new funding sources for business start-up. In the communities, key success factors were identified as:

- the community level of participation
- good capacity development through training
- community support for motivation
- confidence-building
- critical mass of available labour
- hard work
- vision
- excellent timing.

Success factors for individuals doing small or micro-business were having:

- a well-defined product from the bush (bush medicine, cultural stories and language)
- a strong personality

- traditional knowledge and authority
- network support and encouragement
- energy and drive to persist
- low costs or overheads.

The impacts of the business network, WestCAN, have been to:

- share knowledge and help members to access industry jobs and funding
- gain confidence by realising the marketability of skills, training and talents
- teach younger generations about bush businesses
- develop a list of achievements
- realise the ability to earn money through hard work
- market the talents and skills of individuals and the Network more efficiently online.

The following project outputs were achieved:

- Six new businesses were identified by the WestCAN members.
- Three older businesses were developed to the next stage of expanding and marketing.
- Business plans were developed in workshops with IBA and the project officer.
- Capacity-building workshops and visits to other businesses provided real examples of success and positive mentors.
- Presentations at various conferences allowed the dissemination and publication of the work of the project, and future publications will arise from the preceding work.
- Identification of funding opportunities gave the opportunity for WestCAN to apply for and manage its own grants as WestCAN has been incorporated and has its own ABN.

10. Future recommendations

WestCAN has great potential, and the momentum of the businesses started should be maintained. Some recommendations for WestCAN to help continue and grow the SMEs in the future are for it to:

- develop a business plan for WestCAN itself, to gain income and employ a project officer
- maintain a standard of communication between members, through the its website (www.westcan.org.au) and emails
- invite other successful Aboriginal enterprises to give presentations and share successes with the Network
- continue to showcase and celebrate any small achievements of the members in order to gain confidence and experience
- work under the guidance of the Elders to retain the cultural context and pass the knowledge to the young people, who will look to the future with new enterprises.

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