

# Beyond Native Title

Economic Development Challenges on Wik Country

# The Bigger Picture

Australian Indigenous organisations now collectively hold significant financial capital as a consequence of land rights, native title, land use and similar agreements, with an estimated value of between \$10 and \$15 billion in investable assets - the majority obviously held in trusts.

These funds are effectively derived from an 'asset swap', whereby Indigenous communities receive financial assets in exchange for use/access of their traditional lands or waters.

There seems to be an increasing desire amongst Indigenous Peoples and other stakeholders to ensure the terms of the 'asset swap' are clear, and that these funds are managed in a way that will best address the short, medium and long-term needs and aspirations of the community or group

At the same time as these funds are being accrued, the engagement of Indigenous People, particularly youth, in the wider economy (through employment or otherwise), remains low. This is exacerbated in rural and remote areas where progress against key 'Closing the Gap' targets remains unchanged, and in some instances, gaps have widened. As I'm sure we will hear in the PM's address to parliament next week.

Naturally, lower rates of employment lead to higher levels of welfare dependency – and the longer a person is out of work, the more difficult it is to find employment.

Despite government programs aimed at closing the economic gap, Indigenous Australians still lag behind fellow Australians on every economic measure. Undoubtedly, Indigenous Peoples are committed to increasing their engagement in the economy on all fronts, including investment opportunities.

For Indigenous Peoples, to remain culturally, linguistically and environmentally resilient, there needs to be greater economic resilience.

It was this concept of resilience that assisted in the creation of the case study I'll be talking about today, the black-fella nirvana of not being reliant on the whim of a Minister, or the brain-fart of a bureaucrat, the idea that, although a community like Aurukun will ALWAYS be reliant on government investment, that eventually we could have control over our own little space, in our own little way - a diversification of revenue streams independent of these external whims and rushes of hot air

## A bit of Context

Cape York's largest Aboriginal community

750,000 hectares under the ALA

Broader Wik Native Title estate covers 2.5 million hectares

5 clan groups

42 family groups

Incorporates the communities of Napranum, Coen, Aurukun & Pormpuraaw

## APN's Vision: (or Purpose)

- assist Traditional Owners to get back to country
- assist Traditional Owners in the transfer of knowledge to younger generations
- maintain the cultural and environmental diversity of Wik and Kugu groups
- promote economic and training opportunities for Wik and Kugu people
- promote social programs to improve health and education outcomes for Wik and Kugu people



# Case Study: *Aak Puul Ngantam*



Native Title was viewed as an endpoint,  
But in many respects it's just the beginning... so

Where to begin?

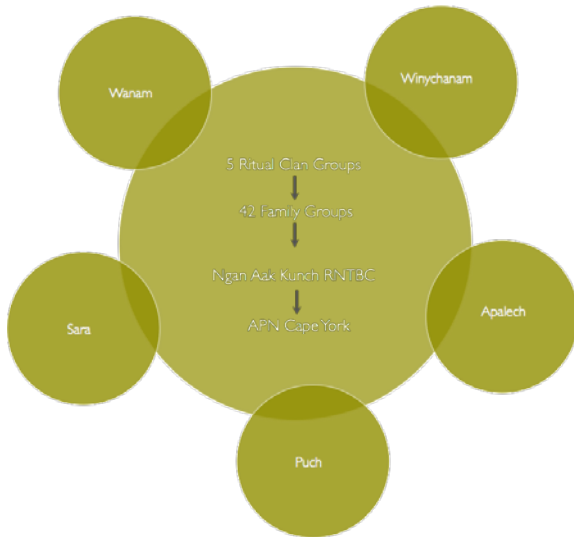
This diagram has been borrowed from a process I was involved in recently – the creation of the Indigenous Investment Principles

No matter what return you're looking for; Social, cultural or financial, short, medium or long term, the process remains the same. First understand where you are at, and where you want to get to

## A PROCESS MAP FOR INSTILLING GOOD GOVERNANCE AROUND INVESTMENT DECISIONS



# APN: Focus on Governance



- Tension between ‘just getting things done’ and ‘how decisions should be made’ – Kalan & APN differences
- 2 years to incorporate – towards the end of the engagement process people would often say “we’re sick of talking, it’s time for us to get out bush”
- Understanding where we were as Wik people
- Articulating our aspirations (*a purpose*)
- Providing a mandate (to the TNSC in turn providing it to the APN Board)
- Form & Structure – critical advice
- Implementation (*getting things done*) – the fun stuff
- Iterative – engagement is continual, people agree to things during a wet-season planning exercise, and once work starts people need to be reminded of those agreements

# Wik Decision-Making

**Ngan Aak Kunch** Registered Native Title Body Corporate

**Steering Committee**  
Representatives from Wik PBC and Local Clan groups  
42 members

**Board of Directors**  
2 representatives from each clan, CEO and ASC  
10 members

**APN Cape York**

- Business/functional enterprise
- Non for profit organisations/Limited by guarantee
- Large membership base made solely from the Wik Clan groups

- 5 ritual clan groups
- 42 Families
- 8 Directors
- 1 Board

How do you get genuine representation & importantly participation? Where people feel their families interests are sufficiently represented on the Board and they feel they have a say?

Larger clan groups like my mothers side – Apalech, having 18 families that are only represented by 2 people as opposed to Puch which have 6 families represented by 2 people – equitability

It's a complex system (the Wik system of governance & decision-making) that needs to work within, and be translated, both literally & structurally, into what is also a very complex system (I'm referring to the Corporations Act). At times it felt like squeezing a square peg into a round hole.

- Complex systems  
“lost in translation?”

# The Challenges

## Internal

- Work culture - the impact 40 years of various iterations of CDEP and Aurukun Shire Council (example of just under 50k of fencing, 46 workers, 8 full-time jobs, only 4 still in employment <10%)
- Family pressures - on both income and private/company resources
- Managing expectations - Nexus between aspiration, expectation and actuation
- Reliance on agency

“At the individual level, the demands on some employees during APN’s fortnightly pay cycle were enough to make them quit, with one young ranger having to give up his hard-earned pay to close kin, some of whom had threatened him with violence. For him, the easier option seemed to go back into the system everyone else was in”

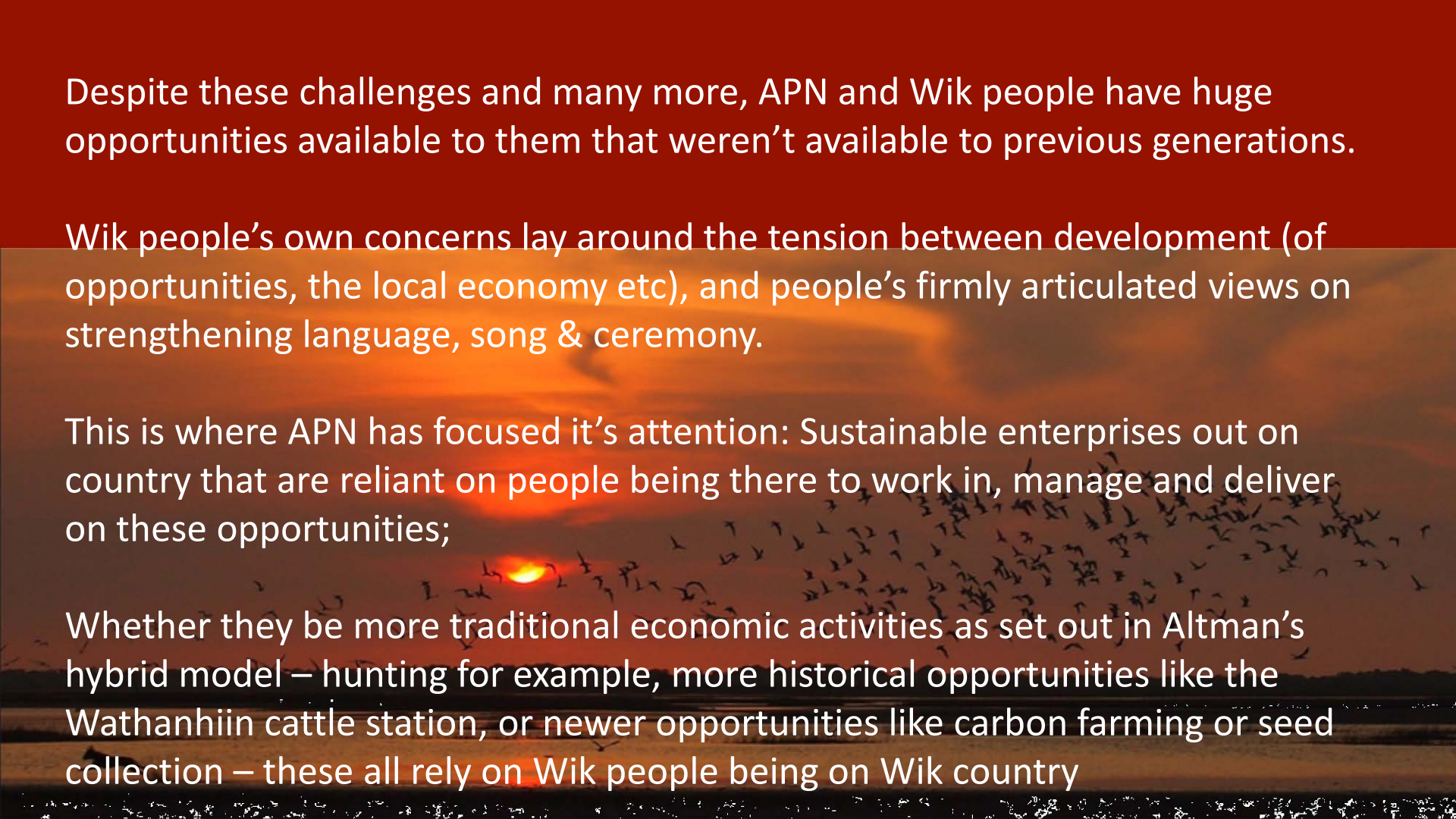
## External

- The ever-changing ideological (and therefore policy) landscape
- Security – for an employee in employment, for an entity with respect to revenue
- Lack of coordination with regard to investment & service delivery – 57 separate federally-funded programs to the tune of \$28m/yr – RFDS?PCYC/APN example
- External interest – Green/Black/Red – Wild Rivers, broke what Noel P refers to as the old Green/Black alliance when Green groups were proactive in their advocacy for Native title rights – advocacy waned & the relationship ultimately became combative when some Indigenous groups were wanting to exercise these rights and ultimately utilise them as leverage to look at economic development opportunities

**As one Cow cocky said to me – it’s hard to be green when you’re in the red – to which I responded well it’s even harder when you’re black**

- I’ll add as a footnote that the old green/black alliance against the pastoralists and their rep organisations like the NFF has gone 180 and over the past 6 years I’ve seen a new alliance of pastoral interests and Indigenous people teaming up around the issue of economic development - the same families that vehemently opposed the Wik NT claim were the very same families that last year voted a Wik person in as their representative in Canberra on Ag interests. When I spoke to one of them to gauge his views on this shift he said with a wry smile – poverty brings people together



A sunset scene with a large flock of birds flying in the sky. The sun is low on the horizon, casting a warm orange glow. The birds are silhouetted against the bright sky.

Despite these challenges and many more, APN and Wik people have huge opportunities available to them that weren't available to previous generations.

Wik people's own concerns lay around the tension between development (of opportunities, the local economy etc), and people's firmly articulated views on strengthening language, song & ceremony.

This is where APN has focused it's attention: Sustainable enterprises out on country that are reliant on people being there to work in, manage and deliver on these opportunities;

Whether they be more traditional economic activities as set out in Altman's hybrid model – hunting for example, more historical opportunities like the Wathanhiin cattle station, or newer opportunities like carbon farming or seed collection – these all rely on Wik people being on Wik country

The reality is however, that this will only provide employment opportunities for a select few, perhaps 10% of the working-age population. In a place like Aurukun, the question still remains, what is everyone else going to do?