

GUNDJEIHMI

ABORIGINAL CORPORATION



Media Statement – 6 February 2013

Koongarra set for permanent protection

Mirarr Traditional Aboriginal Owners today welcomed Environment Minister Tony Burke's introduction of a bill which clears the way for the incorporation of the Koongarra area into Kakadu National Park. This move recognises the long held Aboriginal aspiration to protect this unique area from the threat of uranium mining.

The introduction of the *Completion of Kakadu National Park (Koongarra Project Area Repeal) Bill* was also welcomed by the Djok Senior Traditional Owner of the Koongarra area, Jeffrey Lee AM. Mr Lee was in the Federal Parliament to witness the introduction of the bill, accompanied by a delegation representing the Mirarr. Jeffrey Lee was awarded the Order of Australia in 2012 in recognition of his work to protect his country and gift it to the nation. He has firmly opposed uranium mining on his country on the grounds of the deep cultural significance of Koongarra to its Traditional Owners and concerns about the dangers of uranium.

In his long struggle to protect his country Mr Lee has drawn inspiration from Yvonne Margarula, the Senior Traditional Owner of the neighbouring Mirarr people. Since the 1990s Yvonne Margarula has led the Mirarr opposition to the proposed Jabiluka mine, north of Koongarra and the existing Ranger uranium mine also on Mirarr land. Ms Margarula spearheaded the international campaign against mining at Jabiluka. Her resolve and leadership guided the campaign and prompted a special UNESCO mission, resolutions in the European Parliament and US Congress and several Australian parliamentary inquiries. In the late 1990s Ms Margarula won several prestigious international awards in recognition of her work to protect her country.

In 2001, the Rio Tinto majority owned mining company Energy Resources of Australia acknowledged the opposition of the Mirarr traditional owners and agreed to halt work at Jabiluka.

Ms Margarula said, "Traditional Owners must be allowed to make their own decisions about development on their country. Jeffrey has been speaking out to protect his country and we support him. He has always said no to mining at Koongarra and we support him when he says he wants to see that country put into the National Park. We want to see the same protection for Mirarr country."

The Mirarr people have this month executed a renegotiated agreement for the existing Ranger mine, which was imposed on them in 1978. This agreement, along with provisions of the federal *Atomic Energy Act*, provides for the Ranger area to also be included into Kakadu National Park as the mine is rehabilitated.

The executive officer of Gundjeihmi Aboriginal Corporation, Justin O'Brien, said, "This action by the government is to be applauded, although the name of the bill incorrectly implies that this completes the national park. There is further work to be done and we still look forward to the day when all of Kakadu is included in the National Park and adequately protected from unwanted industrial development."

A WRITTEN STATEMENT FROM MR LEE IS ATTACHED TO THIS STATEMENT

For further information and interviews with Mr Lee and Mr O'Brien: 08 8979 2200 or 0427 008 765

Statement by Djok Senior Traditional Owner, Jeffrey Lee AM, 6 February 2013

This is a great day for me, my country and my culture. My mind is at peace now that I know that there will be no mining at Koongarra and that Djok lands will be protected forever in Kakadu National Park.

My mothers and grandmothers who taught me about the plants and animals, my uncles and aunties who shared their knowledge, to all the elders and my creation ancestors – I give my humble respect for standing here today.

I have said no to uranium mining at Koongarra because I believe that the land and my cultural beliefs are more important than mining and money. Money comes and goes, but the land is always here, it always stays if we look after it and it will look after us.

So many people have helped me along the way. Firstly, I want to thank the Minister for the Environment, Tony Burke, for his determination to see this finally done. I also want to thank the Mirarr people and especially the senior traditional owner, Yvonne Margarula, and the Gundjeihmi Aboriginal Corporation. They have stood by me and showed me that Aboriginal people can say no. I hope that one day Kakadu National Park will be truly complete with the Mirarr lands at Ranger and Jabiluka included in the national park.

There are too many people to thank. Special thanks to my family Stephen, Jacqui & Mai Katona; Dave Lindner, Ian Conroy, Tony Heenan & my Kakadu friends; Gareth Lewis, Richard Ledger, Rian Rombouts; Dave Sweeney and Justin O'Brien, Clare and Darcy Henderson, Peter Garrett, Trish Crossin, Peter Wellings, Chris Haynes, Peter Cochrane, Clare Martin, the Northern Land Council, The Greens, The Australian Democrats, the NT Environment Centre and Larry and Gabrielle O'Loughlin. I also thank those people in the early days from the 1970s who also offered their support.

I thank the journalists and film makers who took the time to listen to my story and then told it so that others could hear. To all the Aboriginal people from Australia and Indigenous peoples from overseas that have supported me and to all those that go on to fight for your own rights - I thank you. All the people that have written to me from across Australia, New Zealand, Japan, Germany, Italy and other parts of the world - thank you. To all the people who I have not met and who I know are out there helping others to stand up and say no, I thank you because you have always been there.

I sincerely thank the UNESCO World Heritage Committee for respecting the values of my country and culture and to the Australian and Northern Territory governments for supporting the inclusion of the Koongarra area into Kakadu National Park.

This has been a very long and difficult struggle for me. I have gone through a lot of trouble and heartache and waited a long time to see this day. However, the fact that I am here today proves that if you are true to your culture and to your land one day you will win.