



Native title resolution challenges remain

A fair go is the key



NATIVE TITLE AND YOU

with National Native Title Tribunal President
GRAEME NEATE

NAIDOC Week's 2008 theme – Advance Australia Fair? – gave us all an opportunity to reflect on how well we are faring in resolving native title issues around Australia.

Some groups have benefited from the native title scheme. There are 77 determinations that native title exists, covering about 854,000 square kilometres or 11 per cent of the land mass of Australia. Some 338 Indigenous land use agreements have been registered. Many other agreements have been negotiated.

But many challenges remain. There are now 504 native title claimant applications around Australia, and it may take about 30 years to resolve these and further expected applications, unless significant changes are made.

I welcome recent statements by Federal Attorney-General Robert McClelland encouraging parties to reach broader agreements that respect everyone's rights and interests, rather than getting bogged down in the technicalities of proving native title.

Such outcomes are possible when parties are willing to negotiate with each other, and come to the table with open minds.

During NAIDOC Week, Tribunal members and staff attended events around the country where they had the chance to share their knowledge of the native title system with Indigenous people and hear about their hopes and aspirations.

These included events in Sydney, where the Tribunal took part in the Redfern/Alexandria family day, in Canberra, at the NAIDOC on the Peninsula family event, in Brisbane, at the Musgrave Park family day, in Perth, at the family day at Ashfield Reserve, and in Darwin, at a promotion for Indigenous employment opportunities in the Australian Public Service (APS), including an Indigenous APS Employment Network breakfast.

I was pleased to participate in NAIDOC events in Cairns and

Toowoomba.

The Tribunal's state offices also held internal events to raise staff awareness and understanding of NAIDOC Week and Indigenous culture and heritage, including an event for staff and Victorian native title stakeholders in Melbourne.

Noongar man Dr Richard Walley, whose talents include art, music and acting, was guest speaker at an event for West Australian staff and others at the Tribunal's Principal Registry in Perth.

Dr Walley talked about the important process individuals go through to develop a voice, and how that pathway had been disrupted for many Aboriginal people.

He explained that, as infants, people don't have a voice – we are talked about. Later we are spoken for. As we grow up we are acknowledged and talked to, before we learn to speak for ourselves – and are finally heard.

Many Aboriginal people have never had the opportunity to speak for themselves, and have been spoken for all their lives.

Native title processes give Indigenous Australians a seat at the negotiating table and a right to be heard. The Tribunal encourages parties to express their views and share their stories in the negotiation process.

This process of developing a voice is a key to enable communication to occur and fair outcomes to be negotiated. By giving everyone a fair go in the negotiating forum, we can aspire to 'advance Australia fair'.



The NAIDOC morning tea for West Australian National Native Title Tribunal staff at the Principal Registry in Perth. Indigenous staff at the event included (front, from left) Andrea Williams, Dean Ryder, Sharon McMiles and (back, from left) Natalie Heir, Kezia Jacobs-Smith, Maurice Agale, Emma Neil, Tina Mills and Paul Willaway.



National Native Title Tribunal staff member Dean Ryder handing out NNTT bags to visitors to the Ashfield Reserve NAIDOC family day.