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KEEPING HOMELANDS ALIVE: Evidence that supports the continued resourcing of dispersed settlements

Introduction

The outstation movement of 70s was part of an Aboriginal response to the failed attempts to assimilate Aboriginal people into larger state controlled reserves and missions. Then and now, there is no evidence that the socioeconomic status and well-being of Aboriginal people is better in larger townships.

Much has been said and written about Aboriginal ‘outstations’ or the homelands movement since it started (ATSIC 2000; Altman 1998; Blanchard 1987; Miller 1985; Stanley 1985). Critics of outstations have stated that these settlements provide little opportunity for residents to improve their economic and social well-being (Johns 2006; Vanstone 2005). There is little evidence to support such statements (Altman 2006); in fact the opposite evidence has been mounted by authors. Research across remote Australia has argued that outstation living can promote benefits to residents and in some cases the wider Australian community in terms of health outcomes (Rowley et al. 2008; Rowley et al 2000), sociocultural, environmental returns (Altman et al 2007; Smith and Claudie 2003) and economic outcomes (Smith and Claudie 2003; Kennedy 2009).

In this briefing paper, we list the arguments in the literature that support outcomes for Aboriginal people who maintain association with their homeland and/or traditional country. In doing so, we highlight the importance of continued resourcing of outstations and support for their residents living on or maintaining access to their country. This paper is politically and socially grounded. It is very much apparent that the current government policy decision is directing most of the additional funding and resourcing towards the largest communities. At the same time, Aboriginal people continue to assert their values and aspirations in places outside of large communities and urban dwellings.

Arguments for improved social cohesion, health and well-being

Morice (1976)

Morice (1976) observed the differences between an outstation, Kungkayunti, and the community of Papunya. He argued that the return to a more traditional lifestyle at Kungkayunti increased Indigenous autonomy, social cohesion, identity and deterred antisocial behaviour. He noted the lower rates of alcohol abuse and aggression by outstation

residents in comparison to residents in Papunya. Morice (1976) concluded that outstation movement provided Aboriginal people with the opportunity for reintegration, heightened self-esteem and autonomy.

Hetzel (1976)

Hetzel noted that improved diet and growth of children and lowered incidence of alcohol intake pointed toward improved nutrition in people living on outstations. He argued that the development of homelands offers a more successful adaptation involving elements of a traditional lifestyle rather than sedentary lifestyle associated with community living.

O'Dea (1984)

This study looks at a group from Mowanjumb community in WA. The findings suggested that Type 2 diabetes were either greatly improved or completely normalised with the people returned to remote lifestyle in comparison to urban settings of a community.

O'Dea et al. (1988)

In this study in Arnhem land, O'Dea concluded that Aboriginal people from homelands have lower linoleic acid and high level of arachidonic acid, which is confirmation of the important contribution of a traditional diet. The results suggest that in terms of nutritional status and risk of chronic health disease for this small community were better than other Aboriginal counterparts.

Dodson (1995) ATSI Social Justice Report

Dodson argues that the return of people to their country is an essential part of overcoming health problems. He argues that there is an associated connection between living and looking after country and ownership, control and autonomy in Aboriginal people.

David Martin (as seen in Johnston 1998) – Aurukun

Martin in his research at Aurukun found that in 1986 a large proportion of Aboriginal people had shifted their residence from town to outstations. He said that there were many factors for this, however argued that the most significant factor was people want to move away from situations of conflict.

Johnston (1998) – Deaths in Custody

“The AIU reports that the main reasons for the move back to traditional lands have been to look after country and ceremony. Further, they are the action has been consciously taken to escape and avoid non-Aboriginal society and the problems it has brought on the people, e.g. alcohol”.

Smith and Smith (1995) Getting strength from Country

The authors conducted consultations with outstation residents and reported the existing conditions of health and health services. They found that Aboriginal perceptions of health were holistic and closely linking with country, in particular the ability to be free on country. In doing so, the authors assert that the outstation movement is an act of Aboriginal self-determination and reaffirms cultural and land-linked values. They suggest that outstation living is an important social justice gain and has important, positive outcomes for health.

McDermott et al. (1998)

Arguably, the most significant and conclusive health research, is McDermott's et al. (1998) work at Utopia which compared physical health outcomes people living in the decentralised community of Utopia versus centralised communities. The results indicated that people living on homelands had lower rates of diabetes, cardiovascular risk factors, hospitalisation and mortality. Aboriginal people who live in homelands communities appear to have more favourable health outcomes with respect to mortality, hospitalisation, hypertension, diabetes and injury, than those living in more centralised settlements in Central Australia. These effects are most marked among younger adults. This work has been followed up by the studies below.

Rowley et al. (2000)

Study showed that decentralisation of communities is associated with prevention of diabetes and obesity on outstations remote from the community store.

Rowley et al. (2008)

In 2008, follow up research was published, in which results from a cohort of 296 Utopian homelands residents were reviewed in terms of hospital, primary health care records and death certificates to ascertain the levels of cardiovascular disease. The research found significantly lower mortality overall, CVD mortality and hospitalisation for CVD in the homelands residents compared with NT Aboriginal population generally. The research findings suggest that living in a decentralised community, with its associated benefits of physical activity, diet and limited alcohol access, and social factors, connectedness to culture, family and land and opportunities for self determination, contribute to lower than expected morbidity and mortality levels among Aboriginal people.

Andreasyan and Hoy (2009)

Research by Andreasyan and Hoy (2009) attempted to quantify Indigenous mortality in the NT by remoteness of residence. They found that compared with the general population in Australia, Indigenous mortality was up to nine times higher in remote areas, three times higher in outer regional areas and two times higher in very remote areas. The fact that rates were lowest in very remote areas runs contrary to claims that increasing remoteness is associated with poorer health status and reinforces the positive outcomes associated with in very remote areas.

Burgess et al (2009) Healthy country, health people: the relationship between Indigenous health status and “caring for country”

Burgess et al.’s (2009) study involved 298 Indigenous adults in an Arnhem land community. Their study revealed significant associations between caring for country and health outcomes. Their findings indicated that homelands foster important health-promoting activities that appear to deliver both ecological and human health outcomes.

Arguments for increased land management activities

Altman and Whitehead (2003)

Argued that in remote areas that have remain populated by traditional owners this has contributed to ecological degradation through the decline of Indigenous land management, introduced weeds, animals and wildfires now damage landscapes that are no longer checked by traditional owners. Further, that when people live on their country, they generate economic benefit for themselves by harvesting wildlife for consumption and engage with the market sector by using natural resources in commercial enterprise, such as art and craft production.

Garnett and Sithole (2008) Healthy people Healthy Country

Garnett and Sithole’s study, “Healthy people, healthy country” argues that engaging people in on country activities such as Indigenous cultural and natural resource management has positive outcomes for human health and well-being. Their work was conducted in Maningrida and its associated homelands. This research moves from focus of living on country towards the recognition of working on country and the significant value of maintaining links to country has on health outcomes, or in other words ‘caring for country’ benefits. The research argues that maintaining connection to country is important to ensuring identity and maintenance of cultural and social interaction.

Gansharajah (2009) Indigenous Health and Wellbeing: The importance of Country

Gansharajah (2009) reviewed the literature on connection and potential of country to assist in health initiatives. She argued that there are a range of opportunities for Indigenous people to be able to live or work on country, but that these opportunities may not always translate to practical opportunity for Indigenous people to satisfy their connection to country. She described this in relation to particular aspects of land rights and native title framework.

Davies et al (up and coming)

Arguments for improved Aboriginal employment and economic development

Smith and Claudie (2003)

Smith and Claudie (2003) looked at Kaanju people attempt to develop a land and resource management framework on their homeland. The research supported similar previous

research that Aboriginal people's living on country is an economic benefit, both in terms of environmental and land management outcomes and for wider socioeconomic benefits of Aboriginal living in remote Australia.

Kennedy (2008) Tjuwanpa outstation submission

Kennedy (2008) research on Tjuwanpa outstations, found that in this area where employment opportunities are extremely limited, the outstation environment offered jobs and learning opportunities that are highly sought after by outstation residents. She added that "there are strong indications workforce participation is an important strategy used by outstation families to enable them to live on their outstations.... outstation families use employment as a strategy to support outstation living."

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