

In the footsteps of past feet

For generations before white settlement and for generations after it, the highways across Central Australia were travelled by foot.

There were distinct travel routes between the various language groups through the dry, rough terrain.

These routes usually weaved their way between the soaks or waterholes required to sustain life. The arrival of the motor vehicle and graded roads gradually reduced the practical need to make the long walks, but their spirit was re-enacted earlier this year south of Tennant Creek.

In June, 65 Warrumungu, Kaytetye, Warlpiri and Alyawarra people took 15 days to walk 140 kilometres from Bonney Well to Barrow Creek.

Despite two days of rain and cold, wintry conditions, the old and young walked on from the plain country to finish in the hill country.

One of the oldest, Tommy Thompson, said the walk "was great for younger people as they weren't just hearing stories about history and about country but they were making history and living the country".

Amy Nambula said, "The walk made me feel really strong and really proud, it felt good having the four tribes walking together like they did before."

The idea of the walk came about when women from Ali Curung attended a women's land management meeting in Alice Springs last year and the Central Land Council organised the logistics of the exercise.

Senior woman Mona Heywood from Ali Curung wanted to take young people along the old travelling route that she used to walk as a young woman to show them the soakages and to give them a better understanding of their history and country.

More than half the people who took part in the walk were younger family members keen to learn from their elders. They used cameras and other recording equipment to record people's stories and knowledge of the walk.

The walk took in about 30 soakages with traditional owners working to maintain the health of them along the way. Ellen Haywood said the walk offered a chance to learn off the old people.

"The best thing is the knowledge to be carried on by young people, handed down from old people to us young people and the stories need to be told about this walk and our history," she said.

"Telling them stories about how our old people used to live and travel and survived along the way. How to find food, how to find water and to know which direction we travelling which land, whose land.

"Sometimes some lands have boundaries that certain people have to carry on and if you're travelling from another place then they're the person, owner that has to take the lead."

Mr Thompson said getting young people involved in traditional acts like the walk can help repair some of the damage experienced in Aboriginal communities.

"We had too many problems," he said. "That's why Aboriginal law break down. It got cut in half, chopped off. You have to go back to the start back from that end, start on again, teach the young kids."

Images taken on the walk from Bonney Well to Barrow Creek. A key component of the walk was recording the senior people's knowledge along the way. Many young people were involved in the process and have since edited the footage themselves.



PERMIT UPDATE

The Australian Government has moved to reinstate the permits system on Aboriginal communities by passing the Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs and Other Legislation Amendment (Emergency Response Consolidation) Bill 2008 in the House of Representatives.

The amendments will give government workers and journalists increased access to Aboriginal communities.

The Bill will now be decided in the Senate within the next few weeks, and it is expected that the federal government will seek support from the minor parties to pass the legislation.

Both the Northern and Central Land Councils urge the Senate to support the Bill.

