COVER STORY:
THE BONAPARTE PIPELINE
— OUT BUSH WITH THE TERRITORY’S BIGGEST PROJECT

TENNANT CREEK makes a comeback

meet the 457 MIGRANTS

TALL POPPY
Jenny Um
Born to do business
Building the energy express
Tennant Creek goes for gold
Darwin Convention Centre: opening its doors to the world
Angela/Pamela update
Living dangerously
Meet the skilled migrants
Expanding the market: Vietnamese cattle
Women’s Day on the Barkly
The high end eco-niche
25 years of the Telstra Art Awards
Norma Higgins: rural woman of the year
Katherine’s independent voice
Desert delicious: Ali Curung
Training the workforce of the future
YBE seizes the moment
At the feet of the master: Djalu Gurruwiwi
Words kids understand: Leonie’s books
The Darwin supply connection
Tall Poppy: Jenny Um
Indigenous Bizness: Sisters in clay
Fast Facts: The Territory economy
Stephen Garnett on the knowledge economy
Paddock to Plate
Parting Shots!

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Territory Q is published by the Department of the Chief Minister, Northern Territory Government. Correspondence should be directed to the Department of the Chief Minister, Communications and Marketing, GPO Box 4396, Darwin NT 0801, Australia. Telephone 08 8946 9544 Email communications.dcm@nt.gov.au

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The Northern Territory Government respects Indigenous cultures and has attempted to ensure no material has been included in Territory Q that is offensive to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. However, deceased Indigenous people are pictured on page 34.

Welcome to the second quarter edition of Territory Q for 2008. It’s our own quarterly business and investment magazine.

Territory Q promotes business and investment opportunities across the Territory by profiling the people who make the economy work. The magazine connects us with national and international audiences, and keeps Territorians informed on what’s happening in their own backyard.

Our cover story takes readers to the site of the biggest project currently taking place in the Territory – the construction of the 286 kilometre long Bonaparte Pipeline that, when completed, will deliver natural gas to provide the Territory with its energy needs for the next 25 years.

Then it’s off to Tennant Creek where a resurgence in mineral exploration has sparked the town’s economic revival.

Territory Q carries a message that has never been clearer: the Territory is a great place to live and make a living – and a place of unlimited opportunity.

Paul Henderson
Chief Minister of the Northern Territory

You’re invited for coffee at the Kingfisher Café

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Cover > The pipe bending crew works in the corridor of the Bonaparte Pipeline between Bar Ban Springs and Wadeye.

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The APA Group contracted AJ Lucas, an Australian pipeline construction specialist, to complete the pipeline that will run from the ENI gas plant at Wadeye to the existing Amadeus to Darwin gas pipeline at Ban Ban Springs. The company has one dry season to complete the work if it is to meet the January 2009 gas deadline. “We know where we start and we know where we finish and, if you divide that amount of time by the length of the pipeline it gives you a pretty fast delivery,” explains AJ Lucas’s specialist, to complete the pipeline that will run from the ENI gas plant at Wadeye to the existing Amadeus to Darwin gas pipeline at Ban Ban Springs. The company has one dry season to complete the work if it is to meet the January 2009 gas deadline.

It is the strictest of deadlines. In 2006, The Territory’s Power and Water Corporation entered into long-term gas transportation agreement with the APA Group for it to construct and own a 286km pipeline that would transport natural gas from Italian company ENI’s Blacktip gas field for Darwin’s Channel Island Power Station. APA has committed to have the pipeline completed by 1 January 2009. That Blacktip gas, which is also being developed to meet this timeframe, will fuel the Territory’s power needs for at least 25 years. No pipeline, no Bonaparte gas – that’s some deadline.

The company must complete the project before the onset of the wet season, later in the year, or face major delays. Tough deadlines, however, are nothing new to the APA Group. “We’re used to deadlines,” says APA project manager Stephen Dykes. There’s been a lot of effort put into route selection, ensuring it is free from sacred sites and environmentally sound, and ensuring that the construction plans are state of the art. We can complete the construction in one dry season.”

Mr Dykes alludes to the fact that over the last two years teams of engineers, environmental scientists, anthropologists, surveyors and a host of Aboriginal traditional owners of the land have been studying, surveying and finalising the proposed route. “We have the Aboriginal Areas Protection Authority Certificate,” says Mr Dykes. “There are no sacred sites. The only thing that can happen is if we find artefacts beneath the surface. And in that event, we have agreed processes to deal with it and the hundred metres in which to go around any site.”

A skilled workforce of over 300 is already on site and construction has begun. The 18m lengths of Australian Blue Scope Steel pipe were supplied by Orrcon, manufactured in Port Kembla and shipped to Darwin’s East Arm Port before being trucked to the site. A brigade of tradespeople welds the pipes together into kilometre-long lengths before they are laid in a metre-deep trench. Every single weld is inspected and X-rayed, with any defects repaired. Once constructed, the pipeline is then pressure tested to well above its normal operating pressure to ensure that it will carry gas safely and reliably.

The pipeline route presents few technological challenges even though it crosses the Darwin to Alice Springs Railway, the Stuart Highway and the fast-flowing Daly River. In all of those cases, the pipeline will pass under the obstacles, requiring machine-driven horizontal boring or directional drilling. "One of the reasons Lucas has been chosen for this job is that we’ve got, in house, the capability to do horizontal directional drilling,” explains Mr Perret. "That means we drill down to the depth required, then go horizontal. One of them, at Green Ant Creek, is 1.6km in length.”

Once the pipeline is laid into the trench, the process of ‘reinstatement’ begins. The pipe is buried and topsoil, set aside for rehabilitation, is spread over the 30m pipeline corridor that had originally been cleared of vegetation for construction. Regeneration will begin over the next wet season, recreating the natural habitat of the flora and fauna.

The project’s home in the bush over the next months is the work camp, a colony of air conditioned demountables that serve as accommodation, ablution blocks, office space, and dining room. As the pipeline is laid, at a rate of nearly 4km a day, so too must the camp move to keep up with the progress. Most construction teams work 28 days on and nine days off. During the nine off days, when the camp is vacated, a small crew moves it to the next designated campsite, many kilometres along the corridor.

While meeting the construction deadline is essential to delivering the energy needs of all Territorians, the project’s success is of importance to AJ Lucas for other reasons. “This is the longest pipeline Lucas has done on its own, meaning that usually we are in partnership or a joint venture with another company,” says Mr Perret. “Lucas is doing this one with its own resources, its own equipment, and not teamed up with other companies. It’s a very important project for us.”

Cover story: BUILDING the ENERGY express

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On any morning from atop Two Tank Hill overlooking the town of Tennant Creek, you can watch a variety of exploration crews and geologists in white four wheel drive vehicles, from Landcruisers to Patrols to Hiluxes to pickups, leave the township, fanning out into the bush in every direction. Overgrown, once isolated bush trails are now covered in fresh tracks. Those vehicles were not here a year ago.

In Tennant Creek, the army of new vehicles is a recent phenomenon seen locally as an indicator of activity that is certain to lead to a major revitalisation of the town’s fortunes. Skyrocketing commodity prices have sparked the activity, especially the gold price hovering around the $1000 per ounce mark. At least a dozen exploration companies have moved into the town, taking up new exploration tenements and poring over old mining operations. In a town built on gold and copper production, mines that were once considered unviable are now prospective.

At the wheel of one of those white four wheel drives is Bill Blackwell, the manager of the Peko Rehabilitation Project, the first such development to go ahead. But the project is not yet a mine. Located at the old Peko minesite, the company is processing about four million tonnes of waste to reclaim the mineralisation, using bacteria to clean the minerals. But the voracious little critters provided a surprise. “When we started treating it we were getting 30 per cent recovery, and then we started using the bugs, we eventually get about 90 per cent recovery after 120 days,” explains Mr Blackwell. “But while the bugs were looking after the gold, they actually cleaned up the magnetite and made it into a saleable product.”

The magnetite is separated from the other minerals at the Peko plant and bagged for export to India and to Queensland, where it’s used to clean coal. The export of magnetite will finance further mining of gold and copper, buried underneath the tonnes of waste. But mining could come sooner than expected.
We thought it would take seven or eight years [to extract all the magnetite], but we have the Chinese coming in and they want a few million tonnes of it, and maybe want to buy in as a partnership. If they take it for steel-making, it'll go a lot quicker,” says Mr Blackwell.
Peko Rehabilitation already employs 15 people and they believe that figure will grow to 50 before mining takes place. Other exploration companies are also bringing employees and contracted crews into Tennant Creek, creating competition for available accommodation and a sharp rise in real estate values. “When I first came here two and a half years ago, the average house price was $87,000,” observes Real Estate agent Des Chilton. “I’d say the average price of a home now would have gone up to $115,000.”

The land values in Tennant Creek were the subject of an article in Australian Property Investor citing the case of investor Debbie Robinson who, “bought a four-bed fibro with carport and good-sized fenced backyard for $100,000 and immediately rented it for $230 a week. It’s now worth about $130,000,” the article said. “She also bought a three-bedroom brick veneer house with a new kitchen and bathroom for $112,000 and rented it for $240 a week. It’s now worth $150,000.”

Westgold is drilling about 100km outside the town on the Rover site, also enjoying surprising results. “The main reason we’re here is the copper/gold at the Rover site,” says Andy Beckwith, managing director of Westgold. “But on the 108 site we’ve come up with fairly substantial lead/zinc results that could become an underground mine.”

The largest area currently undergoing exploration activity is being undertaken by Emmerson Resources, a Perth based explorer who have made Tennant Creek the focus of their company. Emmerson bought out the assets of Giants Reef Mining, a long time junior explorer in Tennant, whose holdings included 2700 square kilometres of exploration licences. In that vast area, previous exploration identified between 300 and 400 known mineralised targets.

Deciding on which of those prospects to spend the company’s exploration dollar is Steve Russell, Emmerson’s exploration manager in Tennant Creek. “We’re putting $1.1 million into the field for a company that’s been listed since December,” states Mr Russell. “So six months down the track, we’ve got drill rigs, we’ve got people, we’ve got geologists and a geophysical crew, and we’ve got an office here. We’ve got the commitment to Tennant Creek.”

Another new mine in or near the town would finish off available accommodation and probably start accelerated house construction activity. And a new mine is not far away. Explorer Excalibur is currently drilling on three sites around the old Juno and Noble’s Nob sites, with the Rising Sun site most interesting. “The results from Rising Sun are probably the best results from any explorer in Australia over the past 18 months,” states Alex Bajada, managing director of Excalibur Mining. “It’s very prospective and could be a great open cut operation.” Drilling will continue at Rising Sun before a mining decision is made later in the year.

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Since the last aerial survey of the area was done in 1998, exploration technology has been greatly enhanced. Emmerson plans a new aerial survey and the company is bringing new techniques to the field in terms of reviewing the existing data and generating new data. Both gravity and magnetic crews are currently doing surveys. “The gold is associated with the hematite and magnetite,” explains Mr Russell. “So one way we can find gold is by gravity, which will identify heavy rocks like ironstone. The second way is magnetics. That will identify the magnetism – the magnetite.”

With no end to the commodity boom on the horizon, exploration will continue in Tennant Creek, in all probability, followed by mining. For too long, this regional centre has been deprived of its calling. “There was four years of little or no mining activity in the area and the town has survived that phase because it’s not only a mining town, but a service town for the Barkly Region,” says Emmerson’s operations manager in Tennant Creek, Justin Hankinson. “But certainly the injection of mining into it, is now pushing the town forward more rapidly than ever before.”
Territory Q’s next Tall Poppy

Territory business identities “just a bit embarrassed.”

TALL POPPY regular feature: such as Doug Gamble, Liveris, Neil Ross and Marilynne Paspaley, born to do business.

The family's overcrowded refugee camp. The family's parents across the border into West Timor following the Indonesian invasion in 1975, spending her early childhood in an overcrowded refugee camp. The family's break came in 1981 when they were allowed to emigrate to Australia.

“I'm getting older,” she says, “and I can't manage as many people as I used to, so I think the future lies with finance. I need to work smarter rather than harder.”

We brought the containers back and showed the furniture at the Showgrounds, and the exhibition went well. So we took what was left over and went into retail. No idea. No experience. Why not?

Coincidentally, Bruce Fadelli was selling his Designer Cane shop, so the pair took on partner Kerry Collins and bought Mr Fadelli's shop and stock. Infidelity furniture was born. “The name was a bit tongue in cheek, but it just stuck,” explains Infidelity manager Kerry Collins. “But it's a good catchy name that nobody forgets.”

Today Jenny Um remains a silent partner, leaving the shop's operation to Ms Collins.

Ms Um was busy with new ventures at Casuarina Square. She opened the Pinnacle Café and bought the existing K-Tong Cafe, both of which were later sold, and she still operates the Fresh Fillings sandwich shop in the Casuarina Food Court, selling juices, smoothies, salads and sandwiches. Again, she and Brian bought a rundown business and doubled the floor space and turned it into a more complex usage space.

A workforce of 16 people are currently working there. “We've always stuck with basic necessity,” says Ms Um.

Our products aren't luxury items. We are a volume business. All our products are pre-made fresh on the day. All our pastries and cakes are baked in-house. The concept here is fresh, healthy, quick.”

Ms Um has come a long way from the dramatic conflict that framed her childhood. Born in East Timor, she fled with her parents across the border into West Timor following the Indonesian invasion in 1975, spending her early childhood in an overcrowded refugee camp. The family's break came in 1981 when they were allowed to emigrate to Australia.

But Jenny Um is too modest. In their own way, she and husband Brian Arneth have contributed significantly to the Territory business culture, establishing a wide range of businesses in the hospitality, retail and export fields, while working tirelessly raising funds for Camp Quality. Ms Um is responsible for businesses as diverse as the Delicious Blue Café, Fresh Fillings and the Pinnacle Café in Casuarina Square Shopping Centre, Infidelity Furniture, and the recently renovated Café 21 in the Darwin Mall. At just 36, she is at the forefront of a new generation of Territory business entrepreneurs.

Café 21 is an enterprise that is currently the focus of Ms Um's attention. Situated at the top of Darwin's Smith Street Mall, the café has been a meeting place in the Darwin CBD for years but was in need of refurbishment. An Um speciality is taking rundown businesses and transforming them into something livelier, more inviting, and profitable.

With the aid of her landlords, the Paspaley family, Café 21 had its seating expanded to incorporate a public walkway, and a long glass case was introduced, offering an entire new menu of fresh foods.

“People see it as a refreshing change,” says Ms Um. “They're able to have a better fresh on the day. All our pastries and cakes are baked in-house. The concept here is fresh, healthy, quick.”

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The opening of Australia’s newest convention centre in the tropical harbour city brings a new experience to Australia’s conference organisers and their delegates.

Darwin Convention Centre is the missing piece of the city’s business and leisure infrastructure jigsaw and the first purpose-built convention centre in the Northern Territory’s capital. Having a world class convention facility recognises both Darwin’s long-standing reputation as a unique destination as well as its emerging status as a dynamic business hub.

The Darwin Convention Centre spans a total floor area of 22,900 square metres, offering a wide selection of conference, exhibition and function facilities for up to 4000 delegates. Integrated all under one roof are an auditorium, multi-purpose halls, meeting and waterfront rooms to meet the demands of global conference and exhibition organisers. “The size of the Darwin Convention Centre gives us the flexibility to grow, as we expect Darwin, with all it has to offer, will be a great destination for our members,” says Dr Kersti Seksel, immediate past president of the Australian Veterinary Association Annual Conference, which will bring 900 delegates to Darwin in May 2009.

The auditorium seats 1500 delegates and can be subdivided into two equal spaces. The multi-purpose halls can be adapted for up to three concurrent exhibitions, including space for catering and coffee breaks, plus an additional seven meeting rooms suitable for small groups or larger groups up to 630 delegates. Retractable partition walls can shape halls and breakout rooms to specific needs, making them as large or as small as required. The centre is also equipped for interactive multimedia technology, wireless internet and networking with technology specialists on hand to ensure all communications needs are met.

“…our point of difference is Darwin’s relaxed tropical atmosphere, that will make every delegate feel genuinely welcome to this unique part of the world.”

Essential facilities and services on site include five star catering, audiovisual production, a café and parking for 300. Operating its own fully equipped kitchen with chefs on staff, all meals are prepared on-site and served right from the kitchen to the table. The extensive food and beverage fare is modern Australian in character, incorporating local and regional specialties.

The Darwin Convention Centre was designed to incorporate a range of green building initiatives and to be the most energy efficient building possible with careful consideration to the orientation and shape and integrative blueprint to minimise overall energy consumption for the lifetime of the building.

General manager of the Darwin Convention Centre Malu Barrios said, whether attending a conference, an exhibition, a training seminar, a gala dinner or a board meeting, everyone will receive quality service standards that they would expect from any international standard convention centre around the world. “Our team’s culture is all about listening to the client’s needs and being one step ahead throughout the whole planning and organisation process. But our point of difference is Darwin’s relaxed tropical atmosphere, that will make every delegate feel genuinely welcome to this unique part of the world,” added Ms Barrios.

Ms Barrios and her business development team are very pleased with the progress of bookings at the centre, in this fiercely competitive market. In Australia, there are nine world class purpose-built convention centres all vying for their share of national, Asia Pacific and international events.

To date, 29 major conventions and two exhibitions have been secured at the new centre as well as numerous banquets, and regional meetings. The international and national conventions alone will bring over 20,000 conference delegates and their families to Darwin city. These additional visitor numbers are spread throughout the year from April to November, bolstering visitation numbers beyond the traditional tourist season months of June, July and August.

Clients have been delighted with the responses from their members on announcing Darwin the future location for their events. For many, Darwin could never have been considered without the development of the new Darwin Convention Centre. National Insurance Brokers Association chief executive Noel Pettiman said the choice of Darwin for the association’s 26th convention recognised the need for a new and different destination and provided easy encouragement for delegates to extend their stay and enjoy the wonders of the Top End.

The Darwin Convention Centre is a project of the Darwin Cove Consortium and the Northern Territory Government and is managed by international venue management specialist AEG Ogden. AEG Ogden also operates the Kuala Lumpur Convention Centre in Malaysia, the Brisbane Convention and Exhibition Centre and Cairns Convention Centre in Australia, and, opening in 2010, the Qatar National Convention and Exhibition Centre and, and the New Delhi Convention and Exhibition Centres. “I can certainly see Darwin becoming an integral part of the national and international conference circuits,” says Bryan Holiday, managing director of International Convention Management Services Australasia.” With increasing air capacity, good accommodation infrastructure and a world class convention centre operated by seasoned professionals, they’re doing all the right things.”

Left >> Head chef Jock Mitchell in the Convention Centre kitchen. Above >> The auditorium seats 1500. Right >> The café in the ground floor foyer.
It may look like a desolate stretch of Central Australian desert, but it was one of the most hotly contested sections of mining real estate in Australia. A group of 40 companies, some with profiles as high as the China National Nuclear Corporation, Energy Resources of Australia, Deep Yellow Limited, Areva and Sinosteel Australia, competed for the right to explore the highly prospective Angela/Pamela tenement for uranium. Early exploration showed the potential for an in-ground value of over a billion dollars worth of uranium at 2007 prices.

But it was a joint bid by Canadian uranium giant Cameco and Australian explorer/miner Paladin that won the day, the exploration licence awarded by the Territory Government. “When I got the call, it was as much a surprise to me as anyone else,” recalls Cameco’s regional director for Australia and Africa, Jennifer Parks. “Other companies have since said that ours was a winning combination: Cameco, a uranium producer with a long term presence in the Territory, and Paladin who had all the old Uranerz drilling data - so we could hit the ground running.”

Located just 25km south of Alice Springs, the uranium was originally discovered as an airborne radiometric anomaly in 1972 by uranium explorer and miner Uranerz, and later confirmed by ground radiometrics. Trenching and drilling in 1973 and 1974 led to the discovery of significant uranium mineralisation at Angela and Pamela. But before the deposit could be mined, the bottom fell out of the international price of uranium, followed by the then Australian Government’s Three Mines policy that excluded new uranium mines. In 1990 the lease was placed in reserve from occupation to protect it from other explorers.

The Canadian and US assets of Uranerz were bought out by Cameco and John Borshoff, formerly with Uranerz and the founder of Paladin. Mr Borshoff also bought all the old Uranerz data detailing the extensive drilling the company undertook across the prospects. Then the price of uranium turned around and successive Federal governments changed their views on uranium mining. It is that old data that now needs to be re-evaluated by modern drilling. “The first thing we’ll do is go in and validate some of that previous work and we’ll use that to firm up a new resource number,” explains Ms Parks. “But before that we have to start doing environmental, heritage, cultural and baseline studies.”

Cameco is quick to point out that it has succeeded only in obtaining an exploration licence. To mine, the joint venture needs to apply for a mining lease. Then community consultation, environmental impact statements, and social impacts evaluation are required before a mining lease is granted. “People think it’s a fait accompli that there will be a mine there. We might find that the uranium price is an issue. Mining could depend on costs associated with the mining method we decide on and what we determine the long term price of uranium will be,” says Ms Parks.

To obtain the right to explore the site and perhaps mine it in future, Ms Parks says, the Cameco/Paladin bid had to maximise their commitment to provide local benefits. Ongoing opportunities will exist for about 200 workers plus the support services they will require. “If it’s so close to Alice Springs, why wouldn’t you have a residential workforce? You wouldn’t do fly-in, fly-out,” she says. “I mean, you may have to for some specialist positions but, for the bulk of the workforce, we see them living locally.”

However, public concerns over uranium mining remain in Alice Springs. There are heritage and lifestyle issues with the old Ghan railway and the Finke Desert Race passing through the licence. Some residents are afraid that radioactive dust from the mine will float over the town, or that deep mining may corrupt the underground water table. Ms Parks points out that the minesite is well outside the water table and that dust suppression techniques will be used, with binding agents to keep it on the ground.

“We understand people’s concerns about air and water and we’ll need to address those but the upside is that it’s so close to Alice Springs,” says Ms Parks. “It’s a brilliant development opportunity. There will be flow-on benefits in sourcing supplies locally with jobs and businesses, particularly for Indigenous people.”

Except for the odd visit, the Angela/Pamela site will remain vacant and unworked until 26 July 2008. That is the earliest date the tenement can be officially granted to Cameco/Paladin. They can then begin exploration drilling in a program that will last at least five years, with metallurgy and technical studies also taking place. If, after that time and all that work, a decision to mine is made and all approvals given, it will be 2014 at the earliest. Will there be a mine at Angela/Pamela? “We’re there because we hope there will be a mine there,” says Ms Parks. “But the reality is, it’s a high risk, high-reward business. Some things just don’t make it. Some things do. But that’s the risk you take.”
Lying in a hospital bed earlier this year, Mark Grosvenor remembers the moment he ‘woke up.’ remembering who he was, but couldn’t remember how he got there. He looked around and asked, “Where am I? What happened?” He was quietly told that, while driving his sprint car during a race at Melbourne’s Bacchus Marsh race track, a mechanical malfunction had sent him hurtling into a concrete wall at 160km an hour.

“How long have I been in here,” he asked. For two weeks he’d been in a dazed state, conscious but suffering from post traumatic amnesia, following a terrible blow to the head. The force of the impact snapped the reinforced tubing holding his seat in place, sending the driver out the side of the car. Treated by paramedics at trackside, Mr Grosvenor, 39, was quickly airlifted to the Royal Prince Alfred Hospital.

After a few weeks in hospital, the driver, who had a less eventful crash at Warrnambool a few days earlier, was on the mend. Counting himself lucky to escape death on the speedway, Mr Grosvenor yearned to get back to Darwin and his comparatively sedate day job—flying helicopters into remote waterways searching for crocodile eggs and water bombing bushfires.

It will, however, be quite a few more months before the Civil Aviation Authority allows Mark Grosvenor to return to the joy stick of a helicopter. But he’s using the ground time to get stuck into the administrative side of his business, because Mr Grosvenor is the owner operator of Albatross Helicopters, his 13 aircraft constituting the largest chopper fleet in the Territory. It is a company that has seen steady growth and continuing expansion.

Mr Grosvenor chose a life of adventure. He was a 21 year old electrical fitter/mechanic when he began spending weekends helping friends work with cattle on Mt Ringwood station. There he got his first taste of helicopter mustering. “Once I’d been up in them a few times mustering, I decided that this is what I wanted to do,” he recalls. “So I sold the car and most of my gear, took leave from work, and went down and got my licence.”

Once he had is chopper licence he returned to the north, doing helicopter feral animal control in the Top End and later began mustering and shooting feral goats in the Pilbara district of WA. Back in Darwin, Mr Grosvenor decided to go out on his own in 1996. He bought a Robinson 22 for mustering and began looking for contracts in other areas of endeavour unique to the Territory: weed and wildfire control, aerial tourism and crocodile egg collection. “I’ve been growing slowly ever since. Probably one helicopter a year on average,” he says.
In the late dry season wildfires are an all too common north Australian phenomenon. It’s then that helicopters help in what often becomes a life and death battle. “The waterbombing helps Bushfires NT and volunteers on the ground to back burn,” explains Mr Grosvenor. “They’ll decide to cut a firebreak and begin back burning into the main fire. Then we’ll come in behind the break and if the fire jumps the break, we can waterbomb it and they can get on with their job.”

Mr Grosvenor’s waterbombing is legendary among bush fire fighters. “Mark’s waterbombing really does save lives,” says John Whatley, the senior regional fire control officer for Bushfires NT. Mr Whatley tells of a fire last year at Acacia Hills that saw one of their volunteer firefighters stranded while trying to save a house from an encroaching wildfire. With her radio out of order, she took refuge in her car as the fire swept in. That’s when Mr Grosvenor appeared overhead, dropping a waterbomb directly on top the car. “If it wasn’t for Mark in the machine, one of our volunteers would have been killed,” says Mr Whatley.

High end tourism is an area of growth among helicopter companies. Albatross operates specialty fishing trips to remote waterways, where cashed-up fishermen can spend the day fishing from a riverbank in splendid isolation. The company now employs eight pilots, most of whom are the sons of pastoralists who grew up in the cattle industry, and were attracted to helicopters in the same way Mr Grosvenor was all those years ago.

An increase in work out of the Darwin area will see Albatross move from its rural Noonamah base to an area much closer to the city. A new 8ha base, rezoned industrial, will emerge this year near Robertson Barracks in Palmerston. But the Albatross fleet is unlikely to expand. “We’re big enough now. I don’t want any more aircraft,” says Mr Grosvenor. “I just want to maintain what we have now, and keep all my pilots flying.”

Seeing the potential of work with the emerging crocodile industry, Mr Grosvenor invested in float systems that allow him to land safely in wetland areas. During the wet season, Mick Burns, owner of the Darwin Croc Farm and Porosis skin exports, contracts an Albatross chopper to help him raid crocodile nests across the Top End. Aiming to supply a quota of 15,000 eggs to his Darwin farms, Mr Burns and assistants are flown by helicopter out to a variety of isolated wetland areas from Gove to west of Darwin. The teams are dropped near a nest where Mr Burns scoops the eggs from the nest, while the assistant scours off the omnipresent female crocodile that guards the nest.

In order to land a team as close as possible to a nest, Mr Grosvenor developed a sling technique to lift one person at a time from the helicopter over the wetland and try to land them close to a nest that would otherwise be inaccessible. “It’s a technique designed to avoid heat exhaustion and dangers of walking too far through a swamp to a nest,” explains Mr Grosvenor. “A lot of times I’ve had guys walk 400 or 500m through cane grass to a nest and they’ll come out vomiting with heat exhaustion.”

The wet season, from November to April, is also the time Albatross is engaged in weed control. Mimosa pigra is an introduced wetland species that takes over thousands of hectares of floodplain in areas where it’s allowed to go unchecked. The company is contracted to spray the mimosa before it seeds and the rising floodwaters spread the plant into new areas. Mr Grosvenor has ordered a versatile new fixed-wing Air Tractor aircraft from the USA that can be used in weed control, and also can waterbomb 2400 litres of water on wildfires.

Once the Top End dries out, Albatross is contracted by Bushfires NT to aid in wildfire control by both firebombing and later, waterbombing. Early in the dry season helicopters are used to start fires in cool burns – controlled burning of grasslands to avoid wildfires later in the dry.
Mr Tiley was just one of the business people trapped in the skill shortage that is currently troubling a cross-section of the national economy, in particular, employers in northern Australia. Industries feeling the absence of skilled workers range from health care to mining to manufacturing to primary industries to hospitality. Overseas employment, however, is now filling those vacancies, with many of the Territory's overseas workers arriving here as 457 temporary visa holders.

After initial discussions with the Territory’s Department of Business, Economic and Regional Development (DBERD), Mr Tiley went to the shipyards of Singapore to look for welders. With the aid of a local employment agent, they targeted guest workers from India who would soon be out of contract. Under Singaporean law workers must return to their countries of origin after working there for three years and nine months.

Mr Tiley identified 20 candidates, and made a short list of 10 interviewees, all of whom were first class welders having worked in the Middle East before Singapore. Seven of those were contracted to Universal. But has it worked? “They were productive from day one, and they’re some of the best welders I’ve ever seen,” states Mr Tiley. “No rework. They’ve done thousands of pipe welds, 10 to 20 per cent of which are X-rayed, and not one failed.”

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On above award wages that far surpass their Singapore earnings, the welders, all on 457 temporary visas, have integrated well into the community, some even joined by their wives and children. “In Singapore, there is only work. There is no life,” explains welder Pramad Kumar Mishra. “Everybody works 12 hours a day, Saturdays and Sundays as well. It’s much better here. If we get the chance, we want to become Australians. For me the education of my children is the main thing.”

While there are a range of different models throughout Australia, DBERD is the Territory’s Certifying Body for regional migration schemes, and at its helm is Mary Cunningham. She says the 457 visa scheme is not a cheap labour program, with all skilled migrants paid in line with market rates in the Territory, at or above regional minimum salary levels and well above award wages.

To qualify, overseas workers must be skilled to a management, professional, trade level or semi-skilled, such as advanced clerical, service or transport workers. Unless they are exempted under Department of Immigration and Citizenship rules, all 457 visa applicants must have functional English.

Skilled workers entering under the standard criteria for the regional permanent residence, the Regional Sponsored Migration Scheme (RSMS), must be under 45 years of age. However in areas of high skills needs, RSMS does allow exceptional circumstances for overseas workers over the age of 45 years and those with less than functional English.

In 2006-07, 46,680 temporary 457 Visas were issued nationally to foreign skilled migrants, with the largest proportion of those (16 per cent) issued to workers in the health and community services industry. All overseas doctors and lots of nurses enter Australia on 457 temporary visas. Many, like Ottilia Chakanetsa, a registered nurse at the Alice Springs Hospital Renal Unit, are keen to become permanent residents.

Trained in her native Zimbabwe, Ms Chakanetsa was originally sponsored by Alice Springs Hospital and is now awaiting her permanent residency. Her previous experience in haemodialysis made her a valuable new recruit. “The renal unit here is much larger than in Harare, so it’s challenging for me,” says the soft spoken Zimbabwean nurse. “The machines here are more complex but they are very good. While we used an old model in Zimbabwe this was new for me, but I have been able to upgrade my skills and I really enjoy it.”

Ottilia joined the Territory renal services team in August 2007, initially travelling to Alice Springs from Zimbabwe by herself. “I admire her strength in doing that whilst leaving behind her husband and twin boys who joined her here once their 457 visas had been granted,” states Bronwyn Taylor, Clinical Nursing Director at Alice Springs Hospital. “It’s great to see the family reunited now; the boys settled in to school and Ottilia’s husband employed in a good job.”

When Paul McCourt, of Paul’s Service Centre in Darwin, decided to recruit some skilled motor mechanics from the Philippines, he made sure he got the right people for the job. Acting through a Darwin based agent, 24 Filipinos applied for the jobs he offered by email. Paul then sent forensic Luke McGee to Manila, not only to interview the 24, but to give them written and oral exams to check English language skills.

Mr McGee hired a vehicle and a Manila workshop to provide the practical test. He swapped the sparkplug leads around, causing the car to misfire. He then asked the candidates, before they lifted the bonnet, what the problem was. Then he asked them to fix it. The test narrowed down the choices, with the firm setting on two, who were made an offer of employment. Mr McCourt says he would not hesitate to do it again. “We needed top quality people,” he recalls. “So when we talk about how good our new workers from the Philippines are, it wasn’t luck that brought them here. It was homework and we got better than we expected.”

Mr McCourt has been impressed with their work ethic. “They came to me and said I made a mistake with their pay, that I paid them too much,” he remembers. “I told them that they get double time for working overtime, and then it was, ‘oh wow, can we have more?’ They really want to work.”

The skills shortage, however, is not confined to the mechanical trades. Hospitality in rural and remote Australia is one of the areas of greatest concern, as Beat Keller of Keller’s Restaurant in Alice Springs is all too aware. Acustomed to hiring backpackers to work at wall staff, he hired British traveller Helen Dixon as a waitress. She performed well, displaying valuable hospitality skills. So when he discovered that she was interested in staying in Alice, he offered to sponsor her to work as his restaurant manager.

Under the sponsorship of her employer, Ms Dixon was granted a 457 temporary visa. She has since been granted her Australian permanent residence under the Regional Sponsored Migration Scheme. “It’s my job to make sure that the people who come in to this restaurant have a really great night,” explains Ms Dixon.

Mr Keller, who has opened another local business, now can afford to leave the operation of the restaurant to Ms Dixon. “She is better than I ever thought she could be,” says the Alice Springs restaurateur. “The customers love her. I would honestly say, she would be the best restaurant manager in town. She has what it takes, but I don’t work for me, they work for her. These kinds of people are so good that we cannot let the opportunity to have them work here pass us by.”

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The delegation now realises that there is more to live cattle exports than simply buying the animals and unloading them in Vietnam. To make the trade work, they will look at a model of success. Upon their return, they will stop off in Indonesia to research live cattle operations in a country that takes 91 per cent of the Territory’s export cattle.

There, cattle are purchased at around the 330kg weight before adding over a 100kg in a feedlot, thereby allowing the importer to value add before slaughter. “We’re asking importers to not only invest in the cattle, but a lot of other upfront costs as well,” explains the Department of Primary Industry, Fisheries and Mines’ (DPIFM) director of pastoral production Alistair Trier.

That means investing in feedlots where cattle will spend months fattening on local vegetable and agri-byproducts like chopped corn, molasses and brewers grain. That means building proper slaughter and processing facilities while training staff in the handling of large numbers of live cattle, all of which are currently absent in Khanh Hoa Province. “It’s important for the Territory industry that, if we send cattle to new markets, we ensure the markets are acceptable in the eyes of the Australian public,” says Mr Trier.

Last year the Territory was Australia’s leading exporter of live cattle to South East Asia, sending 247,281 head to Peninsular Malaysia, Sabah and Sarawak, the Philippines, and Indonesia — that’s 34 per cent of the entire Australian export total. It is a trade valued at over $200 million, creating more than 1000 jobs across the Territory, and it is a trade that has grown to record levels, partially due to the combined efforts of the NT cattle industry and the Territory Government.

They represent a people who are developing a growing taste for beef. They are a delegation of six leaders from the Khanh Hoa Province of Vietnam, visiting Darwin to find out what it would take for them to import Territory live cattle into their busy port city of Nha Trang. The group are looking at how Australians have built their cattle industry on professional standards of animal husbandry from the pasture to the wharf. “Today there’s a high demand for beef in Vietnam,” says Ms Le Thi Thu Ha, General director of the Trading and Investment Company of Khanh Hoa Province. “The Vietnamese people enjoy high quality beef more than other types of meat. They especially like Australian cattle.”

Closely aligned for the purpose of expanding exports, the private and public sectors join forces to provide technical assistance to countries like Vietnam where beef consumption is becoming more popular and economies are on the rise. Government and industry provide importing countries with feasibility studies, plus advice on cattle nutrition, tropical feeds, handling, feedlot management and processing. “When we sell our cattle we have a duty of care to make sure the cattle uphold their quality right to the marketplace,” explains DPIFM’s Dr David Ffoulkes.

While in the Territory, Government and industry representatives took the delegation to the NT Government’s research facility at the Berrimah Farm, yards where cattle are held until they are loaded onto ships for export, the wharf at Darwin’s East Arm Port where they saw ships being loaded with live cattle, and Camfield Station in the Victoria River District where they saw first hand where cattle are bred and mustered for sale. “They have to learn to handle the cattle and create the right environment for the animals,” explains NT Livestock Exporters Association CEO Adam Hill. “If that’s not done correctly the cattle just won’t put on weight and weight is where the profit is for the importer.”

The Vietnamese delegation has the power to begin importing cattle from the Territory, but they agree that, to do it properly, they must upgrade their infrastructure and take advantage to the assistance provided by Territory consultants. The finance and the budget will come from the Vietnamese import companies and the money from the banks with special low interest loans by the Khanh Hoa Provincial Government. “When we go back we will have a meeting to evaluate the project and see how we can handle it. If it is a good project and can be established, we will write directly to the Northern Territory Government to inform them of our decision,” states Ms Ha. “It depends on many different factors, but I strongly believe that, with the assistance provided, the project will be successful.”
Bernadette Burke is on the phone to Alice Springs Hospital Accident and Emergency: “Hello Doctor, I’ve got Roxy Faulk here, and she’s smashed her left index finger in the cattle race, and it’s pretty swollen. She thinks it might be broken. No…the bone is not protruding through the skin. It looks to me like a fracture.”

Injuries like this are a daily occurrence on cattle stations, but this one, Brunette Downs, is 1000km from any town, let alone a major centre. Situated in the Barkly Tableland a thousand kilometres south of Darwin, most serious injuries require evacuation by the Royal Flying Doctor Service. But Ms Faulk’s finger doesn’t require such an effort, the tall former fashion model from Brisbane not happy to stay away from the work she so enjoys. “I’ll just do this for a year and then go on,” says Ms Faulk. “I hate the city now. I get so bored and the people are all weird. I like it up here.”

More and more women are attracted to the Territory pastoral industry, taking on a wide variety of roles from ‘jillaroos’ to managers’ assistants like Bernadette Burke. She is Brunette Downs manager Henry Burke’s wife and runs the stately homestead, looking after the station’s 50 staff while he operates the cattle business for station’s corporate owners, the Australian Agricultural Cattle Company.

A similar role is carried out by Robyn Peatling, a 100km down a dirt track at Alexandria Station, owned by the North Australian Cattle Company and managed by Robyn’s husband Ross. “I refuse to be called the ‘manager’s wife’ because it only means you sleep with the manager,” says Mrs Peatling. “So I sat down and wrote a job description and came up with, the ‘station services coordinator.’ It’s the station and the services for people who live here: health care, accommodation, catering, building repairs and a general go-fer.”

The core business of these massive Barkly stations is cattle production, and few operations in Australia can support more than Brunette Downs and Alexandria. The flat, treeless plain of the Barkly Tableland is considered perfect cattle country, supporting enormous herds. Brunette is over a million hectares with a capacity to run 80,000 head of cattle. “Alexandria is about 6000 square miles, which is irrelevant to me,” says Mrs Peatling. “It’s just big.”

Both women grew up in the industry. Mrs Peatling was raised on cattle stations in the Kimberley and the Victoria River area of the Territory, and Ms Burke in rural Queensland. When the Burkes married 28 years ago, he was the head stockman on Wallhallow Station in the Barkly, and she served as the cook in the stock camp, sleeping under the stars. “That was the way of being together and doing the job together,” she recalls. “It was a big adventure. We had Aborigines in the stock camp in those days and the women were very kind to me and taught me how to make bread and how to cook. They were very good women.”

Both women have seen enormous changes in the pastoral industry in the past generation. Remote area stations, where TV was once a luxury and telephones were of the pedal variety, now offer many more creature comforts that close the distance gap. “We have Austar TV and the internet,” says Mrs Burke. “In those days only the station manager had a phone so we all communicated with the outside world by letter writing. Now all of the quarters on Brunette have their own phones, and a lot of people have internet connections to their bedrooms.”
On Brunette, the Burkes’ four children have all remained on the property. One son is the helicopter pilot, one younger son is in school on the property, and daughter Jessica is a jillaroo running the weaner camp. She wants to get more involved in training horses and working with cattle. “They’re all very happy with what they’re doing,” says Mrs Burke. “We encouraged them to go away, but they love the bush. They have a happy work/life balance.”

That work/life balance in the area is enhanced by the annual Brunette Races, which attracts over 500 people from around the region and from afar, and for females, the Barkly Women’s Day. In its 12th year, the event started at Brunette, originally held on the station’s guest house veranda. It has since moved to Barkly Homestead, a regional truckstop, where it regularly attracts over a hundred women, some from as far away as the Gulf country in Queensland, north to Katherine, and across to the Alice Springs area.

Outsiders have the idea that people on cattle stations in remote areas get very few visitors, but, in fact, the reverse is true. Entertaining is one of Mrs Burke’s most formidable duties. “Sometimes you’ve got to host people in quite a formal manner and other times it’s more relaxed,” she says. “I counted 600 visitors at the guest house last year and that’s not counting tradesmen. That’s parents of staff, cattle buyers, agents, consultants, and directors of the company. It’s a fair bit to fit into the day.”

Mrs Peatling is pleased with the growing participation of women in the pastoral workforce. “We had one jillaroo when we started in 1991 and now a third of our stock people are jillaroos and we have two head stockwomen,” she explains. “We have admin girls, a domestic, and we don’t have a female bore-runner but I know places that do.”

Job applications from women now outnumber men on properties right across the Territory. While some jokingly put the sudden interest down to the popularity of the television show McLeods’s Daughters, Mrs Peatling sees it differently. “I think girls these days are very adventurous and looking for something different,” she says. “They’re very independent and prepared to travel by themselves a lot of the time.”

Organised by Mrs Burke, the Barkly Women’s Day features an array of guest speakers: novelists, artists, digital photographers, share market analysts, personal health experts, a laughter therapist, yoga and belly dancing instructors. Presenters talk are followed by lunch and networking. “Women need that day to support each other,” reflects Mrs Burke. “It’s a transient population on the Barkly because there’s so many corporate owned properties. People come and go. So when they come for their first Women’s Day they often meet their neighbours for the first time.”

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If it’s a quiet, lazy sleep-in you are seeking, Bamurru Plains is not the place for you. Situated at the edge of a wildlife studded wetland floodplain, the first light of day is heralded by a cacophony of bird calls – everything from corella screeches to magpie goose honks to rainbow bee eater whistles. If that’s not enough to end any thought of lingering sleep, a rumbling herd of wild horses races past your safari bungalow, followed by the grunts of nearby water buffalo. But while a late sleep at Bamurru may require ear plugs, it is this remarkable variety of wildlife that visitors from around the world and across the country come here to experience. And they pay $898 a night, with a minimum stay of two nights, for the privilege. Bamurru Plains, operated by Charles Carlow, is the latest Territory operation to enter the high-end tourism market, targeting high income travellers seeking a memorable ecological experience while enjoying ‘wild bush luxury.’ It is a market many Territory operators once believed to be unsustainable. “We’re making people really sit up and think,” says Bamurru manager John O’Shea. “Industry people said there’s no way that this is going to work. And this is only our second season but, from the feedback we’re getting and from the advance bookings we’ve got for this year and next year, I think we’re doing something spectacular. We’re already getting repeat visitors.” Situated on the edge of the Mary River wetlands about 200km east of Darwin, Bamurru Plains opened for business in February 2007. Since that opening, six new cabins have been constructed, bringing the lodge’s peak capacity to 21 guests with 12 staff. The operation is marketed by Wilderness Australia and other high end tour operators, who design individualised tours that see most visitors flown in from Darwin. “They want the good food and fine wine coupled with the type of wildlife experience they get in Africa’s private parks,” explains Wilderness Australia’s Georgina Coke. “There’s a huge high end market happening now in Australia.” That high end tourism market is one that has been slow to emerge in the Top End, but has proved to be an important part of Bamurru Plains’ positive first year growth. “At first, we weren’t promoting to the Australian market at all yet 42 per cent of our occupancy last year was Aussies,” says Mr O’Shea. “It was a dead-set surprise. We were marketing to the high end international niche market, but it’s the domestic market that’s worked.”
The group’s marketing recognises a rising green tourism market, both nationally and internationally. More and more people in high income brackets are seeking new experiences that include a strong ecological experience.

While working in Africa with Cathay Pacific Airlines, Mr Carlow had a vision of bringing the professional African approach of first class accommodation in private game reserves to Australia.

The Bamurru Plains choice was ideal. The lodge area is leased from the owners of Swim Creek Station, a 5000 head working buffalo operation. Visitors are taken out in small open trucks to view and photograph the introduced animals with the native wildlife also in abundance. On a typical bush trip, visitors are likely to see dozens of water buffalos and wild brumbies, as well as agile wallabies and a remarkable variety of birds.

On the wetland side, visitors race across the Mary River floodplain in an airboat. In an area that is the breeding habitat for tens of thousands of water birds and woodland species, hundreds of magpie geese rise from the reeds as the airboat approaches. The boat stops among a flotilla of water lilies, including the distinctive pink lotus. Further along the airboat glides into a flooded paperbark forest christened the Kingfisher Café, because it is there, as the morning sun rises above the trees, that coffee and homemade biscuits are served.

The lodge’s green credentials carry through to the construction and operation of the lodge and cabins. During the building of the lodge the absolute minimum of trees were removed and, in stage two of the development, only seven trees were lost. Native pandanus trees remain a distinctive feature of the property. An impressive 75 per cent of the camp’s power requirements are generated by 240 solar panels on site. Most refrigeration, light and power is solar generated, topped up with diesel for just four hours daily during the sunny dry season.

Visitors enjoy splendid cuisine with the accent on Territory produce, and fine wines from southern vineyards. At the dinner table they compare a visit to Bamurru Plains to other high end operations like Far Away Bay in the west, Queensland’s Lizard Island or El Questro in the Kimberley. But no other Australian operation can match Bamurru’s exciting wildlife experience. “I just couldn’t believe how vast it was,” says lodge guest Chris Longley, a Sydney magistrate. “On the airboat we got this amazing feeling of going through the reeds with the magpie geese rising out of nowhere. It’s been pretty special. I can’t wait to go back and tell people.”
In the Arnhem Land community of Yirrkala workers at the Buku-Larrnggay Mulka Centre are slapping the last masking tape on the long parcel protecting a finely cross-hatched bark painting. In Kintore, in the western desert near the WA border, a stunning 2m long acrylic is stretched and wrapped for shipping at the Papunya Tula artists’ shed. And in the north Queensland community of Mossman, a group of collaborating artists are wrapping a 3D artwork made from fibreglass. These parcels from such far-flung places have one thing in common: they are all addressed to the same place – to the Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory (MAGNT) in Darwin where they will compete for the $40,000 Telstra Award in the 2008 Telstra National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art Award (NATSIAA).
The award, however, played a big part in reversing that perception. “It was partly in response to that prejudice that we decided to bring a lot of different and diverse works together to show people what a broad palate that Aboriginal art encompassed, and the tremendous cultural diversity that existed,” recalls Margie West, then the curator of Aboriginal art at the MAGNT. It was Ms West who organised the initial awards that were designed to promote Indigenous art to a wider audience, while providing a space in which the artists could have their work represented in a respected state institution. It started at an exciting time for Aboriginal Australians. The Land Rights Act had just been introduced, the land councils formed, and the outstation movement, which saw people returning to live in their traditional homelands, had begun.

When the Australia Council started to put more resources into remote community art centres, a dramatic surge in the Indigenous arts industry continued throughout the 80s and into the 90s. NATSIAA mirrored those events: the emergence of the desert movement and of fabric printing, the giant banks from Arnhem Land and an increasing number of female fibre artists. The Telstra Art Award remains a clear snapshot of what is happening across Aboriginal Australia.

As the award took on a strong national flavour, sometimes attracting 600 entries, so too did it attract national scrutiny. Another controversy exploded onto the front page of The Australian newspaper in 1997. It read: “Revealed: black art scandal, white man claims credit for prize winning Aboriginal painting.” The painting in question was Kathleen Petyarre’s ‘Storm in Arnhem Country’, an acrylic painting that won the top Telstra prize the year before. The story was based on an assertion from Ms Petyarre’s estranged husband, Ray Beamish, that he had conceived and painted more than half the award winning work. The story prompted the MAGNT to initiate an inquiry to reassess whether Ms Petyarre should be allowed to keep the top Telstra prize.

The inquiry found that the artist and her sisters had all been painting that traditional dreaming for years and, though Mr Beamish had collaborated on the painting, this was common among painters in remote communities. The inquiry decided Ms Petyarre would keep the prize. “The decision reflects the sorts of activities that go on in Aboriginal communities,” explains Ms West. “It’s perfectly legitimate for Kathleen to involve a relative if she wants help in the execution of her work but, in terms of the art market, they consider that to be inauthentic if it’s not done by the same hand.”

Today, when artists fill in their entry forms, collaboration is recognised. Artists are asked, “if there was collaboration, who was it? Who assisted in its production?” One reason that question is asked is because many collaborations are entered, but an individual artist is only allowed to enter one work. They must also create the work specifically with the award in mind, and works cannot have been previously exhibited in any way.

This year over 300 entries have been taken, but only around 100 will be hung or displayed. To make pre-selection decisions, high resolution images are sent to the organisers, and the field is chosen by a panel of artists, curators and industry professionals. “We look at the aesthetic merit of a work,” says Francesca Cubillo, curator of Aboriginal art at the MAGNT.

“It doesn’t matter who the artist might be or where they’re from, or what media they’re using. It’s also about looking at Indigenous art practice occurring around the nation, and it’s also about recognising new and emerging artists as well – but it’s aesthetics first.”

The final judging is done by two high profile judges selected from the industry.

This year’s silver jubilee exhibition will feature a special addition. It will include a tour of the award nationally and internationally, including a retrospective of 24 previous winners. The show will hang at the Shanghai Art Museum in China. It will be part of a gallery exchange that will see a Chinese exhibition show at MAGNT, following a visit to Shanghai by Chief Minister Paul Henderson earlier this year. “We want to not only celebrate the award’s silver jubilee,” states Ms Cubillo, “but look retrospectively at its history and do things that will take the award to the next level.”

The Telstra Art Award is never far from controversy, closely reflecting the escalating prices of Aboriginal art, as well as trends in the industry as a whole. Back in 1984, when the award kicked-off at the newly built Museum and Art Gallery in Darwin, controversy existed over just what constituted Aboriginal Art. Urban Aboriginal art was dismissed by critics and considered to be not real compared to the works created in remote communities by traditional artists.

While the Telstra Art Award is considered the premier event on the nation’s Indigenous art calendar, this year’s award, held in August, will be extra special: it is the 25th anniversary of NATSIAA, an award that is sponsored by Telstra. “Telstra has supported Indigenous art and Indigenous artists in Australia since 1992; a 17 year commitment we take very seriously,” says the general manager of the Telstra national Indigenous directorate, Lawrie Mortimer. “This year marks the award’s silver jubilee, a fantastic milestone and something Telstra is extremely proud to be a part of.”

Telstra’s sponsorship not only provides the generous prize money the major award and $4000 each for four other categories, but extends to assisting the MAGNT to host each year’s opening night on its lawns. Held under the stars on a cool dry season evening, the unveiling of the entries and the announcement of the winners of the annual exhibition attracts a diverse collection of people who make up the Indigenous art industry: Indigenous artists and their families from remote communities scattered across Australia; curators from national galleries; commercial gallery owners and buyers eager to view the works that will mark new trends in the industry. And they all dance beneath the palms to black rock bands like Top End stalwarts Nabarlek or the Saltwater Band.

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Norma Higgins is a mango grower who hates to see good fruit thrown away. “What really frustrates me is the waste,” she explains. “Up to 50 per cent of our mangoes do not go to market. Wrong shape, too big, too small, too ripe. Even through my little packing shed I was throwing away tonnes. Literally.”

But instead of simply complaining about the amount of waste in the industry, Mrs Higgins did something about it. She help organise the Katherine Region Fruit Processing Group to obtain a grant to set up a commercial community kitchen for local people to process their fruit waste into preserves, sauces, chutneys and cakes. It was this community action that earned Norma Higgins this year’s Rural Industries Research and Development Corporation Rural Woman’s Award.

The group got $118,000 funding from the Australian Government Agriculture Department, under the condition that they match that figure. Her application was accompanied by hundreds of letters of support from farmers, from people who would use the kitchen, and from the Territory and local governments.

The community kitchen, set up at Katherine’s Red Cross headquarters, was developed to improve profitability for farmers, but anybody can use it. With the funding, the group bought a range of industrial food processing equipment - everything from spatulas, aprons, head gear, measuring scales, to an industrial oven and freezer unit. Producers responded with donations of fruit. “We were overwhelmed with product,” recalls Mrs Higgins. “The growers offered us unlimited lemons, grapefruit, and mangoes. But we just didn’t have the capacity to process all they made available.”

The Rural Women’s Award also carried with it sponsorship to attend the Australian Institute of Company Directors Course in Canberra plus a $10,000 bursary for Mrs Higgins to use in developing a special community project. Her project will be to set up a weekly farmer’s market in Katherine. The idea has already won support from the local council, who will charge a nominal $27 a day to operate the market in the designated spot.

The market will feature a range of Katherine’s local artworks and farmers’ produce grown in the area: mangoes, sweet potatoes, corn and Asian vegetables. Commercial vegies like onions, pumpkins, tomatoes, zucchinis, as well as melons, limes, lemons, mandarins and red grapefruit will be sold.

Mrs Higgins plans to get started in February but must do a business plan and has already got a database going. A market site has been chosen at shady Ryan Park on the city side of the Katherine River Bridge. “The population of Katherine might not be big enough to support the market,” observes Mrs Higgins, “but we get a quarter of a million tourists a year through town, and they have to drive right past that spot. There’s no way they can avoid it!”

Vince Fardone looks back at the last 25 years of the Katherine Times with nostalgia. Celebrating the newspaper’s silver anniversary this month is a milestone he never thought he’d experience when he launched the Katherine Times in June of 1983. But the weekly tabloid has survived and remains one of the last of the independent regional newspapers.

Mr Fardone recalls the VIP launch at the Paraway Motel, producing an initial run of 5000 copies, and delivering them door to door from the back of a yellow mini moko. He had also set up the town’s first film processing lab in the same office space. “I thought the photograpic processing lab might carry the newspaper until you build up clientele and credibility,” says Mr Fardone, “but, as it was, the paper took off as fast as the other business.”

Mr Fardone and wife Jill have been putting the paper out ever since. The paper, consisting of 32 pages printed by Darwin’s NT News, circulates over the sprawling Katherine region from Darwin to Alice Springs. It is even sold in Kununurra. It is a paper designed to inform and entertain, but was nearly forced to close following the Katherine flood in January 1998.

Three metres of water engulfed the Times’ main street office, destroying all contents and leaving the Fardonens broken and despondent. Like many other businesses in town, they thought they were insured but the insurance companies “won out on a technicality.”

Then, while Mr Fardone was drowning his sorrows, he received a phone call from Darwin journalist Jack Ellis, who said, “this is the biggest story ever in Katherine – aren’t you going to report on it?” The call revived Mr Fardone from his melancholy and, with the help of the NT News, Mr Ellis, and the Territory Government, Mr Fardone put out two newspapers a week until he could get back on his feet.

When the first post-flood paper hit the streets, Mr Fardone was at the Shell Service Station cutting the bundles of newspapers, crying at the same time. “All of a sudden I realised that we were one of the first to bring Katherine back to reality,” he recalls. “I didn’t appreciate how necessary it was to boost the spirit of the Katherine community. People just kept coming up and hugging me and slapping me on the back, and I knew it was the start of us all making a comeback.”

The newspaper was soon back to 32 pages and, like the town itself, totally operational once again. And what is the future for the Katherine Times? It will probably end up part of the stable of a major media company, but not until the Fardones decide the time has come. “It’s been an honour and a privilege to have served the people of Katherine for 25 years and it’s something I don’t want to give up,” says Mr Fardone. “I like to look back and think, ‘yeah, we did the best we could.’”
When Paul McLaughlin looked across the arid flatland near Ali Curung for the first time, he didn’t see sun-baked red sand, and saltbush like others who pass here. He saw opportunity. The melon farmer from Condobolin knew that the soil might be sandy, but there is plenty of water below in the Deventer Basin. So much water, in fact, that you can grow fruit and veg year round. It’s like being on the north coast of Queensland but you haven’t got the humidity, so you don’t have disease. ‘Watermelons are a desert plant,’ he thought, and pomegranates are as well. They’d like the cold nights here, but no frost.

That moment last year marked the start of the Desert Springs Melon farm, what will eventually become a 500ha agricultural project, offering real jobs to the nearby Indigenous population. Situated near the Central Australian community of Ali Curung (population 450) on land owned by the Warrabri Aboriginal people, the project was initiated by Centrefarm Aboriginal Horticulture Limited, a body established by landowners to drive the development of horticulture on Aboriginal land. Centrefarm, acting for the Indigenous landowners, approached Mr McLaughlin’s PMG Agriculture, hoping to interest the company in the project.

Once the deal was finally completed, and the irrigation equipment installed, PMG hit the ground running, planting 30ha. “That’s the way the commercial world works,” says Alan Cooney, general manager of Centrefarm. “When they press go, it’s all go. We signed the contract on the 18th of January, and they had trucks turn up there on the 19th of January to start work. Within three weeks they had a crop in the ground.” Then, just 11 weeks later, the farm’s first seedless watermelons were harvested.

That initial harvest is on just 5 per cent of the land that will eventually be under cultivation, producing two crops a year. Mr Cooney can see the day when a giant semi will load two wagons-full of melons a day during harvest periods. And this project is just the beginning in the region. “Starting July 1, we will be starting six new projects,” predicts Mr Cooney. “It will take us a little while to manifest themselves into projects into the scale of Ali Curung because there’s several years work to get to where that is now, but well be starting six new projects in July.”

The first planting at the Desert Springs Melon Farm produced encouraging results. Fine seedless watermelons, seeded watermelons to pollinate the seedless, and a variety of pumpkins were featured. A much greater area will be planted in August, and a large scale pomegranate farm will be planted on the site in 2009.

PMG produces top grade pomegranates for international markets as well as pomegranate juice for export.

Watermelons and pomegranates are the mainstays of McLaughlin’s farm at Condobolin, New South Wales. “Paul has expertise in marketing as well as growing and is involved in a marketing group that provides fruit year round to Woolworths and Coles,” explains PMG’s farm manager, Warwick Harrison. “He knew there was a niche for the time that the fruit can be produced here.” The niche harvest will allow PMG a greater continuity of supply to its clients.

Others have shown interest but it will take time and training to attract workers into full-time positions. For over a generation, what’s happened at Condobolin, is you bring one in and in six months later he’s a different worker than [when he] first started.”

Mr McLaughlin is pleased with his first harvest and believes the Indigenous worker numbers will increase, just as they did at Condobolin. “There hasn’t been any real opportunities for local people out here until now,” he says. “It’s going to take a few years for people to take full advantage of it. Full-time work is still a new concept out here.”

Above > Elton Limbiari with a pomegranate ready for harvest. Right > Pumpkins in the desert.
While north Australian businesses continue to reel from the skills shortage, and are forced to seek qualified employees overseas, there is a growing realisation among employers that more must be done to recruit and train a resident Indigenous workforce. They are the potential workforce that is not going to move away; that calls the region, ‘my country’, that is not interested in flying-in or flying-out. And while other companies continue to talk about the possibilities of training and hiring Aboriginal workers, Rio Tinto Alcan (RTA) in Gove has committed itself to the prospect – big time.

The company has spent over $2 million on the new Arnhem Learning Education and Regional Training (ALER) program, a three-year training regime, partnering with Charles Darwin University’s School for Social and Policy Research and Vocational and Technical Education, that finishes with trainees in work at the RTA refinery. A group of 15 were selected as the first intake, with eight having progressed to the work phase of the program.

ALER replaces an earlier program that emphasised skills training. “The lack of literacy and numeracy limited their employment opportunities,” explains Klaus Helms, Alcan’s former Director of Government and Community Relations.

“Although we could teach hands-on training, as in operations and backhoe and truck driving, we couldn’t get them through the plant doors to understand safety regulations or correspondence and reading instructions.”

ALER incorporates Accelerated Literacy principles into various workplace training modules, including all RTA’s safety inductions. Literacy skills among trainees are low. Program organisers try to take select local Yolngu people with at least a grade four primary school level, but may accept a lower standard. “Over half of those who apply to enter the program do not know the alphabet,” says program director Sandy Daff.

“Often they can only write their first name. When you ask for their signature, they don’t respond. But if you say, ‘like at the bank’ - they know immediately.”

ALER trainees are recruited by the training team that interviews a candidate as well as the entire family, nominating one family member as the trainee’s mentor, who will support them through the program. Then comes the Discovery Session, consisting of six aptitude tests that chart dexterity, behaviours, patience and a range of skills including literacy and numeracy. As with all Río Tinto Alcan employees, the trainees undergo a pre-employment medical.

The program is also mentored by the Djambulu Mit’ji traditional owners group – the elders of the region. As a last step in the selection process, the elders require the candidates to have another interview that addresses their motivation to participate in the course. “The questions Djambulu Mit’ji asks them are very intense,” says Ms Daff. “They put a very heavy emphasis on them representing their community and the young ones that are watching them. Their success is important to the community.”

The trainees embark on a three tier program, and are paid a real wage to participate. The first 12 weeks is called ‘Work Prep’ and the objective is to create the motivation to want to get up and go to work plus intense life skills like cooking and hygiene, computer operation and internet banking. The next 16 weeks is called ‘Work Ready’ and mixes CDU’s Accelerated Literacy with trade skills ranging from welding and grinding, building construction, automotive maintenance, and drivers licence training.

The third step is ‘Work Starts’, where they go into an employment environment at Río Tinto Alcan Gove’s operations. The work environment puts all the ALERT training to practice with a continuing literacy and numeracy component. RTA has named a hundred jobs that can eventually be suited to ALERT graduates. Plant safety is a key, using their newly-acquired literacy skills. “We have safety meetings that are called ‘visual management’,” says trainee Shaun Winungui, “so we are really aware of all the dangers.”

ALER trainees have completed their course, they are assessed for jobs inside Río Tinto Alcan Gove’s operations. But they are not tied to the company. With their new skills, they will be in demand by local government organisations and other local employers like YBE, the Aboriginal-owned civil engineering contractor. “If they are work-ready and have a good work ethic, and they’ve got the skills at base level, they can come and get experience at Río Tinto Alcan or YBE,” says YBE’s CEO, Glenn Aitchison. “And that experience can take them to the next level as being full time operators or leading hands or supervisors.”

ALER is a program that gives high support at the start and addresses the individuals’ motivation to work, giving them the life and work skills to be able to provide a positive contribution to their employer. The hope for Río Tinto Alcan Gove is that the program can be further developed for other employers in the region and also be adapted back into high school programs.

“I’ve known some of these boys for three years, and in the last seven months their reading and writing has improved out of sight.”

Above > Alcan’s Sandy Daff supervises the computer work of Terrance Wunungmurra (R) and Samuel Gununwii.
Right > The trainees cover discs in the processing plant.
Far right > Russell Jeffrey confers with Damien Djakura at ALERT headquarters.
As Rio Tinto Alcan’s multi-billion dollar Gove upgrade nears its completion and begins to wind down, the major national construction firms that produced the work have begun to pack their bags. The expansion has meant production of alumina has increased, as have the movement and processing of ore, and the processing of waste. So, while major construction wanes, the requirements for expanded ongoing service provision creates new opportunities for Gove region businesses. One of those taking full advantage of their local ability to provide those services is YBE (2), East Arnhem Land’s largest Aboriginal-owned contracting firm.

Specialising in civil engineering, road construction, general earthworks and mine site rehabilitation, YBE is set for substantial growth over the next five years. The company is supported by a business charter with miner Rio Tinto Alcan that works towards a mutually sustainable commercial relationship maximising the value of contracts between the two parties. Sustaining and developing Yolngu people’s employment opportunities is a key element in what looks to be a bright economic future for the company’s 90 staff. “As the Rio Tinto Alcan G3 project has been commissioned at the refinery, we have been proactive in seeking extra work in that area,” reports YBE CEO Glenn Aitchison. “Probably another 20 per cent. In the past two years our contacts have grown from an average of $12 million to over $15 million.”

YBE (2) (Yolngu Business Enterprises) is a unique company, wholly owned by the Indigenous leaders of East Arnhem Land, with its board of directors made up of the 26 dilaks – the region’s traditional owners. The company is fully privatised, receiving no direct government funding. It was established over 30 years ago to participate in mining and share in its wealth production.

The group recognises that mining has a regional impact, which is why all dilaks from the region are represented, not just those at the mine and refinery sites. “This company gives us a real opportunity for Yolngu and Balanda (Europeans) to work together,” says board director, Reverend Dr Djiniyini Gondarra. “Balanda can bring their skills and expertise to the company while at the same time they can learn from us. In this way we learn to live where our two worlds meet.”

Above > YBE CEO Glenn Aitchison has a roadside chat with employees Melites Murungurr and Magnolia Yunupingu. Right > Excavation work at the Alcan mine.

Rehabilitation of mined areas is one of YBE’s core responsibilities. The nursery provides native seedlings and plants for landscaping commercial and residential areas and rehabilitating areas affected by mining and processing. “It is the long term business charter between Rio Tinto Alcan and YBE that has really strong mechanisms so that both companies are in a win-win situation,” says Mr Aitchison. “We try and do good business that is mutually beneficial to both companies. Strong support from Rio Tinto means we are both looking for new synergies and opportunities.”

The work YBE performs is essential to the operation of Rio Tinto Alcan’s alumina production at Gove. It has amassed an enormous fleet of heavy machinery and smaller vehicles, including dozers, scrapers, loaders, road trains, excavators, and dump trucks. Haulage of bauxite from Rio Tinto Alcan’s Rocky Bay site continues to be a mainstay of YBE’s business, accounting for a considerable percentage of the company’s revenue. This year they will move more than one million tonnes.

Another area in which YBE delivers service is the disposal of waste material from the processing plant. That residue is taken in a slurry form to ponds behind YBE offices where it is processed.

In maximising the value of contracts between the two companies, local Yolngu have an opportunity to participate in mainstream employment. Currently, approximately 35 Aboriginal people work for YBE in various capacities, making it one of the Territory’s largest Indigenous employers.

Above > Excavation work at the Alcan minesite.

“We try and do good business that is mutually beneficial to both companies. Strong support from Rio Tinto means we are both looking for new synergies and opportunities.”

The company provides a framework and structure that manages the business relationship and existing contracts between Rio Tinto Alcan Gove and YBE.
It’s the kind of place that’s hard to leave. Situated just outside the town of Nhulunbuy, overlooking the Arafura Sea, is the stretch of beach they call ‘East Woody.’ Covered in soft white sand and shaded by coastal trees, there’s a continual musical jam going on. Inside the house the stereo is playing, very young Aboriginal kids are playing along with some vintage Yothu Yindi while outside young to around the senior musician, blowing remarkable sounds from his yidaki.

Below > Djalu Gurruwiwi at home at East Woody.
Centre top > Dhanggal Gurruwiwi with a work in progress.
Centre bottom > Djalu’s 3 year old grandson Kevin is already a yidaki player.
Far right > Djalu’s niece Dhopiya is a skilled artist.

East Woody is the homeland of Djalu Gurruwiwi, 76, and his sister Dhanggal. Mr Gurruwiwi is known worldwide as the master of the traditional instrument, with yidaki enthusiasts from around the globe traveling here to East Arnhem Land, 700km east of Darwin, to sit at the feet of the master to learn his technique. Dhanggal provides the English translations and the lessons in Aboriginal culture. Two Japanese players from Osaka are there now, sitting in the sand and recording Djalu’s every note on their digital device, nodding with obvious approval.

There could be no better site for the Djalu’s first annual Yidaki Festival, set to kick off for nearly a week in late July. It is an event that was announced on the Gurruwiwis’ internet site, djalu.com, with 20 enthusiasts from Europe, Japan and the USA quickly looking places. Many others were turned away. The Gurruwiwis cannot accommodate more, preferring to keep the event small, personal.

The Yidaki Festival is organised as part of the Gurruwiwis’ family business called Rripangu Yirdaki. That not only attracts visitors to play and learn yidaki, but to also sell yidaki that have been fashioned in the traditional manner by Gurruwiwi family members. The business takes orders for about 1000 instruments a year. “Rripangu Yirdaki as a business is one of the few Indigenous businesses that’s really tuckled into the international market,” explains Mr MacLean, from the NT Government’s Indigenous Business and Industry Services. “They’ve gone global. Where lots of others are concentrating on the domestic market, Rripangu Yirdaki’s major client base is Japan and Germany.”

Mr MacLean has organised business planning and assisted with product development for the family’s business Rripangu Yirdaki. The venture is also to be promoted through the Business Hub at the community art centre in nearby Yirrkala, where visitors can book an afternoon at East Woody, where they are assured of an unforgettable ‘Aboriginal experience.’ “My family want to be in control of our life – to be self sufficient,” observes Djalu through a translation by his sister. “We also want to encourage traditional teaching for the young people, to keep their minds strong and keep them going.”

Djalu Gurruwiwi learned to play the yidaki from his father, another master of the instrument who carried one with him always. He recalls his father, at sea, returning from a turtle hunt in a dugout canoe, announcing his impending return with a blast from the yidaki. It was a signal to his family to get a fire going in anticipation of an impending feast.

Djalu’s fame began to spread after a tour to southern capitals in the early 80s. It was in 1981 that visitors began appearing at East Woody, eager to learn from the maestro. He would play the sounds of the honeybee, the dingo running through the bush, and tell the story of how, in the Dreaming, the sounds of the yidaki left Gove, traveling 600km to Croker Island and returned as the west wind.

Over the past 20 years the Gurruwiwis have given master classes at the Garma Festival and travelled the globe introducing the yidaki to the uninitiated, inspiring new fans along the way. “We went round the world to different music festivals. Places like Germany and Japan. They got yidaki players everywhere. Some whitefellas can play really good,” says Dhanggal Gurruwiwi.

Now, on the eve of their first Yidaki Festival at East Woody, the Gurruwiwi family business is set to take another step towards their goal of self sufficiency. “Rripangu Yirdaki’s potential for market expansion is enormous,” says Mr MacLean. “Their product is already the best in the world with Djalu regarded as the best yidaki teacher in the world. He’s his own brand.” 
It is the worst possible day to visit the Hermannsburg Potters. The potters’ art centre in the historic community of Hermannsburg, 130km west of Alice Springs, is undergoing renovations. The long term coordinator, Naomi Sharp left four years ago and her daughter had just left. The day I arrived was the first day of work for the new art coordinator, Margaret White, having just arrived in central Australia from Sydney.

Bad timing? No way.

Dr White and the potters greet me like an old friend. Even though they are just beginning a new relationship, they make room for the travelling visitor from Territory Quarterly. The ladies are all talking at once, laughing as they build their unique pots from local clay.

“It’s Albert Namatjira style painting plus lots of animals,” explains potter Clara Inkmala. “Sometimes we even make overseas animals. We use our imagination. Anything that comes into our head - we do it.” As if to underscore the point, Rona Rubuntja paints a penguin on her small clay pot.

They are busy producing pots for an upcoming July exhibition at the woolloongabba Gallery in Brisbane.

Dr White is busy filling empty paint dishes and encouraging their efforts. She has made the big step from urban academia to outback grass roots art.

“As soon as I met them I realised that there was something very special happening here,” says Dr White, a former senior lecturer at Macquarie University. “I could see the focus with which they come to do pottery every morning. Whatever else is happening in their lives, that focus is so clear.”

The story of the Hermannsburg Potters is well known. The women are Aranda people from Ntaria (Hermannsburg), a former Lutheran mission. It is a community with a rich artistic tradition, known as the home of Albert Namatjira, the country’s first recognised Indigenous painter, famous for his distinctive watercolour landscapes depicting the area around Hermannsburg.

In 1990 a group of local artists sought advice from Naomi Sharp, an accomplished potter from the Northern Territory Open College of TAFE. With access to her expertise and the use of a single kiln, the potters began to produce the unique pots for which they have become internationally known.

The potters work with terracotta clay to make their pots using hand-building and coiling methods. Intricate moulded figures of animals or bush tucker are used as lid decoration and surface treatments. The larger pots employ techniques the women picked up in Indonesia. “I went to Lombok in Indonesia,” explains Judith Inkmala, a potter for 18 years. “We only made small size pots before that. But we learn how to make big pots from them.”

Making pottery is not an established tradition with Aboriginal people, so, unlike painting which has strict cultural guidelines that must be followed, pottery is viewed by the artists as more a vehicle for artistic self-expression. They enjoy the freedom to create. “The Hermannsburg potters are today still contributing to their cultural continuity,” says Naomi Sharp, now retired after years as the potters’ art coordinator. “They are artists who have innate skills enabling them to use any medium that appeals to them and to continue to reassert their links with their country and tradition.”

This year, the Alcaston Gallery in Melbourne held an exhibition, Nanas Etsaha Nuku - This is Our Life, exploring the breadth of practice from this extraordinary group of artists. The Melbourne show was sold out with half the works purchased before the exhibition opened.

In the Alcaston show, the potters included new pots in the sgraffito tradition, experimental glass objects, paintings using the oil medium as well as the classic pots that have won them their major awards and acclaim. “In this exhibition the potters exhibited some of the most stunning ceramics of their artistic history, both in scale and ingenuity, together with paintings that seem to position the ceramics within the magical landscape of the central Australian desert,” comments Alcaston owner Beverly Knight.

While prices for some of the potters’ finest large works has attracted prices as high as $13,000 each, an important aspect of the potters’ story is that they are both highly regarded artistically and a vital run corporate business. Unlike other art centres that feature one or more best-selling artists, the potters refrain from the star system. “One of the essential principles in which the corporation works that makes it a truly cooperative venture is that no potter is promoted over the others,” explains Dr White. “That was written into my contract. Even their remuneration is cooperative. It’s not just about selling pots. It’s being here every day and the camaraderie that comes from working together.”
One of the nominated books is Leaving Barrumbi, the last edition of a trilogy that began with the Barrumbi Kids, telling the story of kids growing up on a bush community. While the Barrumbi books are aimed at teenage readers, the other nominated book is aimed at lower primary kids. It's an illustrated book called You and Me: Our Place and the notes on the back cover are right on the money: “Leonie Norrington’s beautiful text and Dée Huxley’s lush, vibrant illustrations create a world in which the old and new cultures exist comfortably together and children move easily between them.”

It's a book where the main character is a homeless black man who spends his days fishing and entertaining all the kids around him. It is a book that started out seven years earlier as a 40,000 word novel that was cut back to a picture book because it didn't work as a novel.

“Whilefellas and black living on a beach in Darwin is an incredibly complicated thing,” explains Ms Norrington. “It can't be expressed in a novel, but it can be dealt with in words and pictures that touch us on a human level.” She's writing what she knows. Born in Darwin, Ms Norrington moved to the Top End community of Barunga when she was six, where her father was a mechanic operating the local machine shop. She was to later to create a recurring character based on him in her Barrumbi Kids book. She lived on that community throughout her formative years, before moving back to Darwin as a teen. She later married, had three kids and built their isolated bush mansion. Then, during a discussion with a friend about why Indigenous kids don’t read well, Ms Norrington contended that one reason was that there were no books on the market with which they could identify. Challenged to write a story that appealed to Aboriginal kids, she drew on her years at Barunga, creating characters that Indigenous students could relate to. Kids just like them. It was an effort that eventually turned into a publishing offer. She has written seven books since, with a new novel and another picture book set to hit the stands next year.

The winner of the Children’s Book Council Award is to be announced in August, but Ms Norrington already believes she's a winner. “Winning is not the biggest thing,” she says. “Being shortlisted is important because all the libraries in Australia buy the short listed books. People suddenly realise that you’re there, and they get to know the books.”

Off the bitumen and winding through the bush gravel road in the backblocks of Darwin is the home of children’s book writer, Leonie Norrington, and her family. In a home she and her husband built with brown granite and local timber, she quietly turns out books that are now being recognized for their distinctive content, often taking place on remote Aboriginal communities where the protagonists are Indigenous kids dealing with issues of concern to them. Now two of Ms Norrington’s books have been short listed for the prestigious Children’s Book Council Award, a national prize rewarding excellence in that important genre.

In 2007 the Northern Territory's State Final Demand increased by 1.5%, compared to a national average increase of 5.2%.

- Total consumption rose by 5.8%, while total investment fell by 8.2%, coming off very high levels.
- In the year to March 2008, total construction work done decreased by 29.1% to $1.7 billion.
- In the year to March 2007, total construction work done decreased by 29.1% to $1.7 billion.
- In the year to March 2007, the number of residential building approvals in the Territory decreased by 9.4% to 1279.

In the February quarter 2008, Average Weekly Earnings per full-time adult employee in the Territory increased by 4.4% to $1128.80 in annual terms, compared with a national average of $1174.80.

- Over the same period, the Territory’s Wage Price Index rose by 3.6%, compared to 4.1% nationally.

AVERAGE WEEKLY EARNINGS

- In the year to March 2008, Northern Territory goods exports grew by 5.9% to $4.1 billion, compared to the previous year.
- Imports decreased by 19.0% to $2,470 million, giving a balance of trade surplus of $1.6 billion.

INTERNATIONAL TRADE

- In the year to March 2008, inflation adjusted retail turnover increased by 7.1% in the Territory compared to a 4.6% increase nationally.
- In the year to April 2008, total sales of new motor vehicles increased by 9.2% to 10,392 in the Territory and by 7.7% at the national level.

RETAIL TRADE

- In the year to March 2008, retail turnover increased by 3.9% in the March quarter 2008. Nationally, the annual inflation rate was 4.2%.¹

FOOTNOTES

Due to extreme volatility in monthly Territory labour force figures, the ABS does not publish seasonally adjusted data.

1. As a result of the 2006-07 Census data release, the ABS has revised the number of people employed in the Australian workforce. This has affected the calculation of the quarterly and annual growth rates for Employment and the trend unemployment rate. The figures presented in this section have been updated to reflect these changes.
There are three pillars to innovation in a democracy. Universities and research institutions like CSIRO explore the boundaries of knowledge. Entrepreneurs drive short-term commercialisation of ideas and take ideas to the marketplace. But there is a third arm to innovation that is too often forgotten – that is innovation in government. It was government scientists who secured two of the major prizes at the Northern Territory’s Research and Innovation Awards night in May.

John Woinarski won both the Tropical Knowledge Research Award and the evening’s top gong, the Chief Minister’s Award for Research and Innovation, for a lifetime undertaking exceptional environmental science across northern Australia, while a team led by Glenn Edwards received the Southern Cross Television Desert Knowledge Research Award for research on fire in central Australia.

Both are from the Department of Natural Resources, Environment and the Arts which, against the trend elsewhere in the country, has maintained a strong research arm. The upshot is that the Territory Government gets high quality data-driven advice on the long-term consequences of decisions that are critical for sound environmental management.

“I have been enormously fortunate to have worked within governments in the Northern Territory that really understand the importance of research,” said Dr Woinarski, who is also an adjunct professor at Charles Darwin University.

Dr Woinarski’s research, published in innumerable papers and books, shows that the biodiversity values of the Territory’s savannas lie in their continuity, something that he has shown to be almost unique in our over-exploited world.

Both he and Mr Edwards’ team point to fire management as being critical to ongoing maintenance of environmental values. The work of Mr Edwards’ Desert Fire Team has been on control of fire in desert systems. After wet years in particular, fires spread over phenomenal areas in the desert, and most years fires are an issue in many parts of the landscape.

One reason the team won the Southern Cross Television Desert Knowledge Research Award was their effectiveness at engaging traditional owners in the research and management of their estate.

“A key to the project’s success was a cross-cultural understanding of fire – from Aboriginal people to pastoralists,” said Mr Edwards, whose team conducted the research under the aegis of the Desert Knowledge Cooperative Research Centre.

There were three other awards. The Minister for Business and Economic Development’s Innovation Award went this year to Tim Proctor, Carole Cartledge and Mike Apathy for their No Weld Launch and Recovery System. “We recognised a niche in the diving market for more flexible ways of getting divers into the water off marine platforms,” said Mr Proctor. “Now we can put divers wherever a crane or gantry can reach.”

In fact this year’s awards were a good reflection of the breadth of tough environments to which Territorians have adapted - from remote rigs in the Arafura Sea to isolated homelands in the tropics or the desert, innovation is helping people succeed in the modern world.

A good example is of the latter setting is this year’s MckArthur River Mine Indigenous Innovation award, which went to Jackie Nguluwidi, Joanne Yindiri, Meredith Gururranggurrung and Lorne Moralami-Gold for their work in e-finance, e-learning and microbusiness development. Their work was notable for developing the IT capacity for microbusinesses in remote homeland communities in Arnhem Land so that people there can be part of the digital revolution the rest of us take for granted.

It is homeland life in central Australia that inspired the designs of Elliat Rich. One of Australia’s top designers to watch and winner of this year’s AusIndustry New Generation Research and Innovation Award, Ms Rich has designed items like a wearable canvas shelter (it can be a swag, tarp or jacket depending on the fold) or a sofa that responds to the warmth of people sitting on it.

“Innovation in art and design is every bit as important to the Territory as academic research or clever inventions,” says Professor Grahame Webb, Chair of the NT Research and Innovation Board. “Creative industries play a key role in our economy.” And it is the creative industries that are most celebrated at Garma Festival, held in north-east Arnhem Land each August, for which the Yothu Yindi Foundation received Professor Webb’s Special Commendation Award. “When we started rewarding the Territory’s innovators four years ago we feared we would run out,” said Professor Webb. “Instead we have kept finding more and more Territory talent.”
Many of these massive projects were finding it difficult to source a broad range of products from tools, to safety gear, to workshop machinery, and are turning to Territory suppliers in an effort to slash extended delivery lead times. Discount Auto Parts saw the opportunity and began supplying heavy lifting jacks, stands and tyre changers, plus a range of heavy duty parts for four wheel drive vehicles used in mining projects. “We just didn’t have the room to pack the volume of goods we were exporting,” says Discount Auto Parts’ Malcolm Pain. “So we opened the new facility to allow Discount Auto Parts to get bigger with its own warehouse and an export facility to be able to handle the ever-growing Indonesian volume.” The new shopfront and warehouse opened early this month. Discount Autos’ export success was the subject of a presentation by John Berry to the packed house attending the Territory Government’s Indonesian Mining Procurement Forum at Darwin’s SkyCity Hotel. The event brought together local exporters and suppliers with senior purchasing staff from some of Indonesia’s biggest projects in an effort to spark more trade. Mr Berry’s presentation was an inspiration to all those hoping to expand into the Indonesian mining supply market.

Remote area mines are scattered across the archipelago, some of them among the world’s largest – and richest, given the rise in international commodity prices. At Bumi Resources’ Kalim Prima Coal (KPC) operation in East Kalimantan, market capitalisation has gone from $2 billion to $14 billion in under seven months. While coal sold for $30 a tonne just a few years ago, it now commands $100 a tonne. The mine will export 45 million tonnes of coal this year and, after a project expansion it will produce 70 million tonnes, making it one of the world’s largest producers. The mine is home to 14,000 contractors and 3700 company staff.

The operation’s supply needs are staggering: this year they will consume 538 million litres of diesel, increasing to 750 million litres a year in 2011. They will import 117 thousand tonnes of ammonium nitrate for processing, increasing to 175 thousand tonnes in 2011. They will purchase approximately $25 million worth of tyres and hold a spare parts inventory of $60 million. KPC’s purchases of goods and services per annum are estimated at US$450 million. The enormity of providing reliable supply to such an operation is daunting.

PT Inco in Sorowako, Central Sulawesi, one of the world’s largest nickel mines, currently employs 3735 directly along with a similar number of contract personnel, but the company believes that the number of local people who, directly or indirectly, economically benefit from the operation, is between 20,000 and 35,000 people. Brazilian owned, the company forecasts a growth of 7 per cent in the next 15 years.

The mine’s supply requirements are immense. “In our outsourcing, we are looking for a shorter lead time to Surabaya or Sorowako (the operation’s port) because right now, from North America it takes more than 100 days (for delivery).” PT Inco’s Pak Ristani told the Darwin conference. “Even from Australia, it’s 82 days from Brisbane, Perth or Melbourne, because the cargo goes to Singapore first before Surabaya. So we believe Darwin is a good place to source. You are nearby. I believe if most of our cargo came from Darwin, business would be increased and regular shipping to Surabaya would be more frequent.” Darwin is just five days shipping time to Surabaya.

While no direct shipping between Darwin and Balikpapan (the port closest to KPC) is yet in operation, Perkins Shipping announced they would divert their regular Darwin to Singapore service to Balikpapan on a trial basis. MOCEAN Shipping already operates a service from Darwin to Surabaya but the company wants to increase its frequency from once a month to three times. “We need the volume and the question is, can mine operators talk to each other so we can bring up those volumes for the vessel going into Surabaya,” says Menato Group’s, Gehard Magis. “For us the coming years will definitely be exciting times. MOCEAN’s owner at Menato, Charles Menako, is determined to make the Darwin connection much stronger.”

While putting together the volumes of goods is essential for any regular service to become economically viable, the Darwin to eastern Indonesia advantage would effectively slash lead time between an order and a delivery. “Time frame leads to inventory holding,” says KPC general manager and head of supply chain, Simon Scott. “The faster you can get a logistics chain, the less money you’ve got to put up in inventory. So, it all comes down to efficiencies in the chain and geographical distance is a determining factor.”

However, opportunities in the sector are not confined to fuel, mechanics and chemicals. “A lot of the stuff we would buy in Australia is not nuts and bolts – it’s technology,” says Mr Scott. “That means it’s not going to go on a boat. It’s training, IT technologies, radio communications and various control systems developed specifically for mining in Australia.”

In the next issue of Territory Q we’ll follow an NT trade delegation to the annual Balikpapan Mining Expo and visit Kalim Prima Coal, examining opportunities for Territory companies in the Indonesian mining industry.
The king threadfin may have a list of aliases as long as your average fisherman’s tall tale, but there’s no doubt about its qualities as an eating fish. *Polydactylus sheridani,* which has also been called Burnett’s salmon, king salmon, threadfin, threadfin salmon, giant threadfin salmon and golden threadfin, has moist flesh and a delicate flavour that’s perfectly complemented by crispy beer batter (see recipe), crumb coating or a simple grilling.

In fact, put some king threadfin on the menu alongside the more famous barramundi and people who know their fish will pick the threadfin almost every time – and not just because of the price.

One of those is Peter Manning, whose vessel Ruby fishes the Gulf of Carpentaria out of Nhulunbuy. He likes his king threadfin tossed in flour and then fried in olive oil. “It’s a magnificent fish,” he says. “A lot of people prefer it to barrra, but it’s underrated. It doesn’t have the same status [as barramundi]. With some care and the right marketing, it would be an absolutely exquisite restaurant fish.”

The 16.5m Ruby is mainly set up to catch barramundi (with nets) and mackerel (lines), but the threadfin inhabit the same relatively shallow coastal waters and are an important subsidiary catch. Although the threadfin season is the same as barramundi season, February to September, catching them is a little different. “They tend to school, or swarm,” says Mr Manning. “So when they hit, they hit. I went out at the start of the season and we set the nets and ended up with 1.4 tonne of fillet. That’s roughly 3 tonnes whole.”

The total annual king threadfin catch in the Territory is about 300 tonnes, some of which goes to Sydney Fish Markets as whole fish on ice. Most of the remainder is skinned, filleted and snap-frozen aboard the fishing vessels before being sold within the Territory. It retails at Darwin fish markets for around $15.00 a kilogram frozen or $22.00 a kilo fresh.

On board the Ruby, the crew doesn’t usually start fishing until they’re about 80 nautical miles from port, so all the catch is snap-frozen.

The king threadfin is a fine-looking fish, golden and sleek. They’re usually about 800mm to 900mm long, though they can be up to 1.2m. But they’re not as tough as a barra and need careful handling. “You have to keep checking to make sure it doesn’t die in the nets,” says Mr Manning. “The handling really makes a difference.”

Another fan of the fish is Sean Harragon, who cooked with it as chef at Cullen Bay’s Buzz Café and now gives it top billing at his relaxed waterside Boardwalk Café. Grilled, battered or crumbed local threadfin comes with a cornucopia of chips for $12.50, compared with $15.50 for the barramundi, and the punters love it. “It’s very reasonably priced.” Mr Harragon says. “Locals prefer it to barra, but with tourists you just have to explain that it’s white-fleshed, because they associate salmon with pink.

There’s that element of confusion again: like its relative, the so-called blue threadfin salmon, the king threadfin is actually not a salmon at all.

But, says Peter Manning, things should soon become a little clearer. “There’s been a national project to standardise fish names, and all the states and territories had input,” he says. “So it will be officially called the king threadfin right across Australia.”

Long live the king.
Arafura Resources has lodged a Notice of Intent with the Northern Territory Government to develop its Nolan’s rare earths deposit in Central Australia. The company is seeking approval for the mine near Aileron about 135km north of Alice Springs. The mine will produce rare earths and by-products of phosphoric acid, calcium chloride and small amounts of uranium. A mine life of about 20 years is estimated based on rare earths production of 20,000 tonnes a year.

- The album *Gurrumul* by Geoffrey Gurrumul Yunupingu, the subject of *Territory Quarterly* first quarter cover story, has entered the top 10 on Australian iTunes’ most downloaded albums. It entered the national ARIA charts top 100 at number 21, and charted digitally in Italy, France, Belgium and Spain. The singer/songwriter also opened for Elton John in Darwin, a great opportunity for Geoffrey and a significant event for the local NT music scene.

- Listeners to Alice Springs’ 8CCC Community Radio will have heard Territory Quarterly articles read live over the air. In a weekly segment called, ‘RPH – Reading for the Print Handicapped’, listeners who are visually impaired or cannot hold a newspaper or magazine have it read to them by station presenters. “The *Territory Quarterly* features all Territory themes and our listeners can relate directly to them,” says Station Manager Robyn Toi.

- Territory mining company, Energy Resources of Australia, has won an Australian Government Choice for Women citation for 2008. The company is one of only 99 organisations to receive this recognition for achieving outstanding outcomes for women. “I am encouraged to learn of your actions towards removing the remaining barriers to women’s full participation in the workplace by implementing practices such as paid maternity leave and flexible working options for staff and managers, as well as undertaking analysis and committing to action to address the gender gap,” said Tanya Plibersek, Australian Government Minister for the Status of Women in the citation.

- Construction of the new $41 million BOC helium plant at Wickham Point has begun. It is a plant that will take an inert by-product from ConocoPhillips’ LNG plant to produce helium, making the Territory the Australian leader in helium production. The plant is slated to produce 150 million cubic feet of helium each year, 3 per cent of the world’s supply. It aims to commence production in July 2009 and will employ 15 to 20 people during construction and 10 people once it becomes operational.
7% growth in 2008-09* – going to be part of it?

Business and investment confidence is high while our tax regime is low.

The Northern Territory continues to develop as a major trade gateway to Asia with investments in key infrastructure such as roads, rail, ports and airports.

But we’re not resting—the Territory has a commitment to growth with 10 year infrastructure plans paving the way to even greater opportunities.

The Territory is primed to benefit in areas such as bulk minerals, defence support, tourism and construction. It is also developing as a major supply and service centre for the SE Asian mining industry.

Darwin, the Territory’s capital, is poised to strengthen its position as Australia’s second LNG gas distribution hub. Land has been allocated to accommodate future gas-based projects including proposed additional billion dollar gas plants.

With the support of a proven government ready to engage, the Northern Territory is definitely “open for business”.

For information on trade and major projects in the Northern Territory, telephone the Department of the Chief Minister on +61 8 8946 9555, visit our website www.theterritory.com.au or e-mail majorprojects.info@nt.gov.au

*Access Economics March Quarter 2008 released 21 April 2008: “Access Economics is estimating Territory GSP growth of 4.4% for 2007-08 and 7.0% for 2008-09.”