

# Win-win Aboriginal Community Participation in Cotton.

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## Backgrounding the potential

Within cotton catchment communities a significant proportion of the population is Aboriginal and this proportion is increasing, within a wider community trend towards depopulation of rural Australia<sup>1</sup>. The long term economic viability of such rural communities - including their ability to sustain a labour supply for rural agribusiness - is therefore linked to the use and enhancement of the Aboriginal social and cultural capital within them. This social and cultural capital of is strongly linked to Aboriginal relationships to landscape and to 'country' (e.g. Rose, 1996; Rose et al., 2003; Jackson, 2006). Elsewhere in Australia, research that has explored and actively incorporated Aboriginal<sup>2</sup> knowledge and values in landscape has built the capacity of Aboriginal people to contribute to improved natural resource management, and rural development activities, in the places in which they live (e.g. Christophersen & McGregor, 2005; Davidson, 2005a & 2005b; English & Gay, 2005; Kendall, 2005; McCaul, 2005; Pannell, 2005; Pyper, 2005). Within cotton catchments such research offers the opportunity to develop a multi-layered understanding of the historical context of the catchments, and also allows for the exploration of the socio-economic interdependencies of Aboriginal communities and agribusinesses such as the cotton industry. This, in turn, provides the potential to develop novel approaches to Aboriginal employment on cotton farms through the integration of Aboriginal ecological knowledge, ecotourism and participatory partnerships. Whether or not direct participation in the cotton industry is achievable opportunities for the targeted development of Aboriginal skills in a range of businesses ancillary to cotton may also be developed for increased community well-being and sustainability.

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<sup>1</sup> At the 2001 census 15.4% of the population of the township of Moree identified as being Aboriginal, while 42.8% of the population of Boggabilla identified as being Aboriginal. Within the boundaries of the Kamilaroi Regional Council in which these two townships are located the net increase in the Aboriginal population from 1996 to 2001 was 19%.

<sup>2</sup> Although current Australian politics has adopted the word "Indigenous" to include (and separate) Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islanders, Aboriginal people we know in cotton growing area have expressed a strong preference to be called Aboriginal when they are not known by their regional name (e.g. Gamilaraay, Wiradjuri).

## **Aboriginal community participation in cotton: scoping the research priorities**

The Cotton Catchment Communities CRC has funded a scoping study directed at enhancing the capacity of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal organisations to undertake collaborative research within cotton catchments for increased environmental and socioeconomic sustainability. The scoping study has been conducted by a research team combining personnel from the university sector, state-based resource management agencies and Aboriginal community members from northwest New South Wales and southwest Queensland. This research team has reported to the Cotton Catchment Communities CRC with recommendations for the development of a strategic research direction that:

- incorporates Aboriginal natural resource management and related economic development options,
- allows for the generation of networks and linkages amongst research partners and non-partners; and
- (c) identifies priorities for, and pathways to, Aboriginal engagement and research.

The scoping study focused on the towns of Dirranbandi, St George, Dalby, Moree, Narrabri and Warren<sup>3</sup> (Table 1). These towns are all in the Darling Basin and are not necessarily representative of the diversity of cotton catchments across Australia. Nevertheless, they were selected for this study for the following reasons. First, they occur in relatively close proximity to the research and agency organisations conducting the study. In general this has meant that the research has been able to build on the natural resource management agency and Aboriginal community networks already developed by members of the research team.<sup>4</sup> Second these towns include some of the oldest cotton production zones in Australia and hence the likely involvement of the cotton industry with the Aboriginal community in these places is of both historic and contemporary importance. Finally, as Table 1 shows a substantial portion of each of these communities is Aboriginal. Census data indicates this population, in line with national trends for Aboriginal people, is both young and increasing (Trewin, 2003). The Kamilaroi Regional Council (2004) reported that the percentage of the Aboriginal populations of Moree and Narrabri that was less than 19 years old at the last census was 46.8% and 54.4% respectively.

## **Methodology**

In view of its broad consultative scope the study adopted a number of strategies for Aboriginal community liaison and participation. To allow discussions to be relatively unconstrained the research team outlined to participants from the outset that the final report for the study [the outcome] would have two functions. The first was to facilitate the documentation of all issues of relevance to Aboriginal communities living within cotton catchments as probable issues requiring research. The second was to provide a funnel mechanism through which identified issues of importance to the Aboriginal community could be assessed strategically and framed in a manner

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<sup>3</sup> Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal community members of Warren, a town in the Macquarie River Catchment area, contributed informal information but due to issues of timing and availability a wide canvassing of Aboriginal community members was not achieved.

<sup>4</sup> Through (a) the *Gamilaraay Resource Use Project*, a project working to document Aboriginal ecological knowledge in the key cotton catchments of the Namoi, Gwydir and Border Rivers region of NSW (Cotter, 2002) and (b) the network of grower, natural resource management agencies and Aboriginal community groups setup by the Queensland Department of Primary Industries and Fisheries through its Aboriginal Agribusiness support role throughout southern Queensland.

**Table 1. Aboriginal population statistics for Cotton Catchment Communities accessed during this scoping study** (Source: Trewin, D. 2002. *Population Distribution, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians 2001*, ABS Canberra)

Catchment Town	Aboriginal Population	% of Town Population
Dalby	506	5.4
St George	448	17.3
Dirranbandi	128	23.6
Moree <sup>1</sup>	1977	22.3
Narrabri <sup>2</sup>	544	8.8
Warren	375	12.2

<sup>1</sup> Within Moree Plains Shire the town of Mungindi had 164 Aboriginal residents (25.2% of pop.), Boggabilla had 280 residents (43% of pop.) and the nearby community of Toomelah has 241 residents (70.7% of pop.) at the 2001 census.

<sup>2</sup> The nearby town of Wee Waa had 255 residents (14.4% of pop.).

that assessed strategically, and framed in a manner that linked their relevance to the Aboriginal community to their ability to be researched by the Cotton Catchment Communities CRC. In this way it was hoped to convey the fact that we were listening to Aboriginal community concerns and provide a realistic framework within which potential research projects could be identified and/or developed. It was important that our approach to community participation was low key, offered no ‘pie-in-the-sky’ commitments, and actively involved Aboriginal researchers in all facets of the research including data collection. The general approach was to use a semi-structured focus group discussion format to elicit community issues. In these focus groups, participants - led by Mr Warren “Charlie” Waters , a Gamilaraay man from St George - were asked to identify the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats to/of of their particular communities’ involvement and engagement with the Cotton Industry. In Moree and, to a lesser extent, in Warren less structured individual and family group conversations were used to elicit a wide variety of responses from Aboriginal community leaders, health workers, market gardeners, and community and youth workers, as well as from some non-Aboriginal community contacts. Table 2 shows Aboriginal community organisations, and government and non-government agencies to which some of the more than 40 Aboriginal community participants were affiliated.

**Table 2. Community organisations to which Aboriginal community participants were affiliated.**

Gindjorra Aboriginal Corporation (CDEP), Narrabri CDEP, Nindethana Aboriginal Corporation (CDEP) Community Elders (Moree, Narrabri, Dirranbandi, Warren) Qld Cotton Employees (Dirranbandi) Cotton Seed Distributor Employees (Wee Waa) St George Aboriginal Housing Co. Murrumba Aboriginal Housing (Dalby) Wirraway Aboriginal Housing Scheme (Moree) Aboriginal Liaison Officer (Qld Education)	Qld Health (Dirranbandi) NSW Health (Moree, Warren) Balonne Care Qld Police (Liaison Officer) NSW TAFE (Moree) School Liaison NSW Schools (Moree) Narrabri LALC Youth & Crisis care worker (Moree) School student (Dalby)
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## Results

Aboriginal community participants in this study identified that both the current status and future potential for Aboriginal involvement in the Cotton Industry was dependent on understanding one or more of five key areas of concern: Health, Employment, Environment, Education and Culture

(Social Factors). Elements of these areas of concern are summarised in the following section.

### ***Health***

All communities approached identified a number of serious issues in regard to the health and wellbeing of their communities and the likely or possible impacts of the Cotton industry in relation to these. There is a significant concern in the Aboriginal community about the effects of cotton chemicals on human and river/environmental health. Anecdotal comments of a perceived over-prevalence of cancer, asthma and birth abnormalities in the community were striking. Other issues related to the fact that chronic diseases, such as sugar diabetes, within the Aboriginal community place significant demands on the health system in rural towns. Such chronic illness was also seen to reduce work options; and indeed, as one Elder highlighted, when prescription medicines for treatment of these chronic diseases can cost up to \$150/month there is a disincentive to work since the Health Care Card entitlement of the unemployment benefit makes such medicine free. Likewise, as for the broader population in these rural communities, the lack of access to specialist medical services was seen as problematic.

### ***Employment***

“Cotton chipping” was identified as the primary work source for Aboriginal people within the industry but it is unskilled, seasonal work. Due to the recent introduction of new herbicide-resistant cotton varieties, there is also less of this work available. There was a perception that other seasonal work such as stick-picking (conducted in the cotton chipping off-season) is also being reduced. There was a common view that this is a result of the environmental lobby reducing the ability of farmers to clear new land for production. Some Aboriginal people had secured permanent employment in the industry and while this was well-regarded and recognised as a significant personal achievement for the individuals employed, the number of *murris* with permanent jobs in the industry was considered to be too low. A lack of capital was also seen as a significant deterrent for the *murri* community to take up any ancillary enterprises such as share-framing or contract machinery operation, and this despite a committed belief that there were *murris* in the community with a thorough knowledge of all aspects of the cotton industry. Another more recent focus of discontent for *murris* in the southwest Queensland region was the growing trend to bring overseas backpackers and other workers from places such as Sudan to work on cotton properties, diminishing still further the availability of limited seasonal work for local community members. Diminishing work options for Aboriginal people within the industry should not, however, be considered universal. At Dirranbandi, for example, collaboration between large-scale cotton growers, the local Aboriginal community and state government business development agencies is moving forward with the development of an Aboriginal firewood enterprise.

### ***Environment***

Aboriginal issues about the environment within the cotton catchment communities assessed in this study related to:

- Perceptions of the reduction in fish within main river channels because of their entrapment within irrigation channels;
- Reduction in environmental health as a result of chemicals. These issues were raised in the

context of wanting chemical residues monitored in fish, in bush tucker and medicinal plants;

- A general reduction in natural habitat, as a result of clearing for cotton;
- The continuing disconnection from land due to decreasing right of access to places;
- The encroachment of farms into the outskirts of rural townships, particularly where those farms used chemical as part of their management practices, and
- The loss of water [as a life source for the environment] to irrigation.

### ***Education***

The most consistently articulated issues of need raised by Aboriginal participants in our focus groups were the need to

- enhance the education prospects of Aboriginal school children and young school leavers;
- provide more traineeships and apprenticeships [both with clear orientation towards job readiness and meeting industry shortages]
- identify and provide host employers willing to employ Aboriginal people permanently within the cotton industry.

Particular issues raised in relation to the successful employment and training of Aboriginal employees were those related to community mentoring of individuals, cautious approaches by job placement agencies to finding appropriate jobs for individuals so ‘that people are not set up to fail’, and the significant need to provide sufficient support for the long term unemployed re-entering the workforce. In addition it was also identified that there must be clear recognition that school-based traineeships were generally only successful when the individual had strong, stable family support, and this was frequently lacking in Aboriginal communities. Education which focused on cultural issues and the enhancement of Aboriginal ecological and cultural knowledge were also seen as being integral to the enhancement of the social and cultural well-being of communities.

### ***Culture***

Aboriginal community participants provided critical self-evaluation of the social factors impinging on their successful economic and social engagement with the cotton industry, and broader catchment communities. Of particular note was the ready acknowledgement by participants of the problems associated with being part of ‘the mob’. It was outlined that people in ‘their own mob’ even when unemployed felt safe, secure and supported. It was much harder therefore to go out on one’s own to get a real job. In essence ‘the mob’ provided important support but also limited independence. It was identified that role models such as those individuals who were successfully and permanently employed in the cotton industry were required to change the negative aspects of ‘mob support’. There is also a disincentive to capital accumulation through the pressure to share income within ‘the mob’. Attitudinal change was also seen as being required to change the disincentives to full-time work that work-for-the-dole schemes caused.

Drug and alcohol abuse, poker machine addictions, loss of identity and appropriate roles for men in Aboriginal communities were also seen as significant limiting factors to successful employment. “Subtle” or tacit racism was also identified as a significant barrier to working with the industry, as was the industry perception of the lack of reliability of aboriginal community members caused by

the prior bad acts of individuals. This was seen as a 'carry over from the past' that made it more difficult for current community members to achieve. These issues were ones that were seen to require cross-cultural awareness training. In general Aboriginal participants in this scoping study recognized that these social factors were some of the most entrenched and difficult issues to tackle. Underpinning this however was a ready acknowledgement of the importance of the rural community in which they lived for their kith and kin, and a positive aspiration to work to help themselves, their families and the environment in which they continued to choose to live.

### **Towards Aboriginal participation in Cotton, what to prioritise and why?**

Aboriginal people are an underused human capital resource within the cotton catchment communities in which they live. With the increasing recognition of the lack of a skilled labour force to service the rural sector<sup>5</sup> training, incentives and collaborative partnerships that can enable Aboriginal people - particularly the significant proportion of them that are young - to become active participants in the skilled labour market. This must be a viable long term strategy for the social and economic sustainability of these cotton communities. There is strong Aboriginal community concern about, and aspirations for, educational opportunities and employment outcomes identified in this study. These suggest that cotton industry programmes that support education, training and mentoring of Aboriginal students on pathways to employment both within the industry and allied services are the most readily identifiable "Win-win options. Underpinning such general educational support programmes should be a more rigorous participatory action research programme that enables the examination of, for example, entrepreneurial Aboriginal businesses associated with industry initiatives (*cf* Foley, 2000). What are the governance, social capital and industry support mechanisms that are critical to the success of such enterprises? Are these skills and/or enterprise initiatives able to be replicated across catchments or are they situation specific? Allied to these support and training functions must be the recognition that Aboriginal knowledge and concern for cotton catchment environments of itself warrants research. We currently lack knowledge about the subsistence role of fishing, plant collecting and other traditional food-getting in Aboriginal communities within cotton catchments. Related to this, research is need on cotton industry effects upon the environment, especially where such effects may impact bush tucker resources.

Finally this research raises two general challenges for the cotton industry. During this study we received numerous comments that although Aboriginal community members had participated in the industry in some capacity for up to 27 years in some cases, this scoping study was the first to actually ask them about it, and/or to acknowledge that they had both an opinion and knowledge of the industry. There is likely to be an increasing reliance on the Aboriginal community for labour and/or allied services. Such a lack of real involvement with Industry players must be addressed<sup>6</sup>. This is to a large degree a communication challenge. This is also true for any measure taken to address Aboriginal community concerns about the health effects of industry practices.

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<sup>5</sup> There is currently a Federal Senate inquiry into the Pacific Region seasonal contract labour looking at using labour from the Pacific Islands to address labour shortages in seasonal work ( [http://www.aph.gov.au/Senate/committee/eet\\_ctte/contract\\_labour/info.htm](http://www.aph.gov.au/Senate/committee/eet_ctte/contract_labour/info.htm)).

<sup>6</sup> One way of addressing this issue is to conduct oral history research on and about Aboriginal community involvement in the industry.

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