

regular feature: **INDIGENOUS BUSINESS**

Territory



This image - Gumatj workers, constructing the station accommodation, set poles in concrete.

There is palpable energy rising from the lands of the Gumatj clan of the Yolngu people. At Ski Beach, outside the east Arnhem Land town of Nhulunbuy, Indigenous fishermen, handlines ready, are gearing up to take to the water to bring back fresh fish to sell. Nearby is a crocodile farm, complete with incubators to hatch valuable baby crocs for farming. Tourists are camping at sites set up on Aboriginal land at spectacular Port Bradshaw, and an Indigenous construction crew is erecting new accommodation on Garrithiya station, made from timber cut from the station forest. It is all part of the strategy of the Gumatj - creating jobs for their people on their land.

CREATING JOBS on the HOMELAND

Anxious to rid themselves of the reliance on government welfare, the Gumatj, led by chairman Galarrwuy Yunupingu and his advisers, have set out to create sustainable businesses that will employ local Aboriginals in real jobs. They created businesses that suit the preferences and lifestyle of the Yolngu people. "It's something that's based on the land where they live. Somewhere close," explains Mr Yunupingu. "We want to get young men and women into work, with the ultimate goal being economic independence."

The push has begun on the cattle station. As the property's 350 head of Brahman cattle look on, work continues on the accommodation bunkhouse, kitchen and ablation block. A crew of Gumatj trainees are erecting the structure that will house station workers. But those workers will be young juvenile offenders from Gove who have been diverted to the station rather than do time in a Darwin youth facility. Out here they're kilometres from trouble, working on their traditional lands with Indigenous mentors. "These blokes can come out here and get a work ethic, and make something of themselves," says station manager Tighe Mills.

"We can make real savings for this community and, in turn, create employment."

The cattle station will turn off small numbers of animals. They will be butchered on the property, and the meat sold to local people who are all too used to eating tinned meat. Meat, along with most commodities, is very expensive in remote Arnhem Land. "We'll try and get the herd up to about 2000 to make the place viable and then start taking them out to sell for meat for the local people," explains Mr Mills. "That way they'll have cheap meat. We will be getting a mobile abattoir and a butchering room here and we'll get a Cryovac machine for packaging."

The timber used for the support beams of the new workers accommodation has been felled by the Gumatj station hands and milled into planks on the property.



Top > A 5m saltwater crocodile in Gumatj croc farm.
 Middle Left > Galarrwuy Yunupingu at his Port Bradshaw outstation.
 Middle right > Trainees work on outboard motors.
 Bottom > Making their own timber planks with a Lucas Mill.
 Left > The Garrithya station homestead.

Creating a valuable cost saving for the community, the work is carried out using a portable Lucas Mill, a sawmill set-up that fits on the back of a truck. Activating the Lucas Mill was the idea of John Mofflin, from the Jack Thompson Foundation. Visiting the Garma Festival in Gove with the Australian actor, Mr Mofflin noticed the presence of stringybark trees and stout paperbarks. "They are some of the highest grades of timber that there is and this country has millions of acres of it," states Mr Mofflin. "It's not a commercial growing timber area because of the size of the logs, but it's a great resource for these people."

The Jack Thompson Foundation donated Mr Mofflin to the Gumatj to get the Lucas Mill up and running and train station hands in its use. They are now proficient in its use and 19 other communities have expressed interest in getting Lucas Mills operating in their lands. To accommodate that demand, the Jack Thompson Foundation has gone searching for corporate funding. Various corporations have invested in it. "We'd like to set up about five or six projects in one year, but we need to get geared up," says Mr Mofflin. "We need more Lucas Mills and lots more tooling. We've asked corporations to donate tooling because we want to leave the tools here so they can keep going after we've left."

In a region where building even a modest home can cost \$500,000, the cost saving of using local timber can be significant. "The main structural stuff is such a big saving but its also utilising all the resources that you have," explains the community adviser. "We can make real savings for this community and, in turn, create employment," explains Mr Mills. "If I can get four mill workers out of this - four guys who can actually operate the Lucas Mill properly - we can turn out structural beams, floorboards veranda structures, all in kit form."

Closer to Nhulunbuy, at Ski Beach, the Gumatj maritime division is gathering steam. The association has recently acquired the Yiwarr Seafood business, which includes its retail seafood operation and fishing licence, servicing the local market, a community enjoying one of the highest levels of boat ownership in Australia.

With a processing shed now being constructed, the clan has purchased a boat and will employ local people to fish and fillet the catch before selling it to the community. Again, fresh food will be replacing tinned fish. Two days a week a freezer van will take fresh fish to Nhulunbuy and sell specialised species like blue swimmer crabs, reef fish, snapper,

red emperor and bait. Will they have problems in hiring fishing staff? "All you have to do is sing out the window, 'does anyone want to go fishing' and watch all the hands go up. Lots of people are keen to be Gumatj fishermen but they'll employ four at the start and increase that later," observes NT Government Business Advisor Stuart MacLean.

Another facet of the Gumatj clan's growing business interests is their crocodile farm. There are already many mature animals in the farm, plus facilities for egg collection and incubation. An upgrade of the facilities is required before it can again be opened to the public.

Altogether, the Gumatj will be employing 20 people in full-time positions across the new operations. The cattle station is already attracting applicants eager to learn the timber milling on offer by the Jack Thompson Foundation. "We live with the materials that are going into the accommodation," observes Mr Yunupingu. "It establishes pride within the people. It should be everybody's project. Other communities in east Arnhem Land should put their hands up so we can equip them to use timber on their land. It'll bring them the same independence that we are trying to establish here."

