

# Poelina: Witness of the Times



Anne  
Poelina

Aboriginal people can attain a reasonable quality of life. The view that mineral wealth exploitation is a requirement for Aboriginal services such as health, education, municipal services, justice and prosperity is racist and has been used as tool to justify destroying vast tracks of Aboriginal lands and waters.

Lucky Country and Fair Go for All

On the international level Australia continues to be labelled, 'Lucky Country'. The Australian luck came about by the colonisation of Australian governments colluding with corporations when they found a whole heap of wealth in the land which they stole on the premise of an empty land with uncivilised peoples. Even today, when Aboriginal people can prove they have title to their land that stretches back into Bookarrarra the being of time, they still are denied control and ownership over the land they stand on, the soil beneath the ground.

Australian governments are now working hand in glove with the multinational corporations to colonise intergenerational Australian farmers, pastoralist and graziers, irrigators and agriculturalists into giving up their lands and waters to mining. This unAustralian way of doing business is fostering the nationwide call for action through the 'Shut the Gate' principles to protect their rights to their sustainable livelihoods of hard working Australians who have worked with the country over many years, with love, sweat, blood and commitment in death. This matches what I am saying, 'If you come to the Kimberley, for one night, one week, one lifetime, you will always be a part of the The Kimberley'.

This new luck of Australian financial security and the wealth of Western Australia are heavily grounded in a resource expansion boom, marketed as sustainable economic development coming at great cost to all other forms of capital; human, social, cultural, environmental and all other industries as the Australian dollar continues to rise. The economic approach seems counter to the view that world markets are driven by drivers motivated by scarcity. It would seem that as wilderness becomes scarcer around the world its value will increase. Does that mean we should be measuring, valuing and investing in 'The Kimberley' Wilderness for current and future generations with the potential for a win win for the rights of the people and the environment to co-exist in a sustainable way? As a traditional owner advocating for an alternative green economy, around green collar jobs in eco-system services of fire, land, water and natural resources it is becoming a reality there will be little or no investment in a culture and conservation economies until we talk about the political context determining local and regional planning and development of large infrastructure and mining projects. We need to model the full range of benefits as well as the true costs of all forms of capital so we are not in a position fifty years after mining and asking the question post mining boom, 'and then what?'

I have referred to Premier Barnett's dictation to the citizens and families of Broome and to

his comments that Broome local people, local governance, will have no power to stop large scale developments such as the James Price Point (Walmadany) LNG Hub. How true are his words? Citizens in the Shire of Broome will be able to judge the Premier's comments and action in the body of information generated from local government advocacy and planning on these issues in the coming weeks.

According to Environs Kimberley Director Martin Pritchard Media release dated Wednesday February 1, 2012 "Woodside's Drilling work at James Price Point in 2011 did not have Shire of Broome planning approval...This is clearly not an ethical way of going about business and Woodside must come clean on why they did the work without any planning approval. The Shire also needs to explain what action they will take against this breach of the planning laws. You'd hope the same laws apply to everyone, regardless of whether you're a big oil and gas company or an ordinary citizen. ...In a further twist, it now appears that Woodside is applying for retrospective approvals for the work, but not from the Shire. Woodside has applied through a new planning approval mechanism known as the Development Assessment Panel (DAP). This means it will not go through the normal process whereby all Councillors vote on it and the community would have a chance to have a say. A Development Assessment Panel has only two local Councillors on it. The other three members are chosen by the government. It looks like Woodside has tried to by-pass Shire decision-making process by going to the DAP. It not a democratic way of decision-making." One of the most remarkable things is that despite Woodside having done so much destruction and clearing of native vegetation and habitat without appropriate approvals Woodside are now asking for carte blanche planning approval through the DAP to do whatever they like whenever they like?

Despite the extensive work undertaken in developing a Sustainability Framework for Western Australia by the former Premier Geoff Gallop there has been no open and honest dialogue for this Sustainability Framework to guide local, regional and state planning and developments. Instead the successive governments at all levels have rapidly ignored this investment and have advocated strongly for the 'removing of red tape' in considering large scale infrastructure projects particularly around mining and a 'develop at all cost' agenda.

Is there a way forward?

The 'old people' senior elders from many Kimberley cultural landscapes tell me there is a way forward a way that is based on Aboriginal customs and laws of the 'Wunan'. The 'Wunan' covers an extensive cultural landscape which included the whole of the Kimberley down to Uluru and up to Kakadu and back to the Kimberley. These principles enshrined co-existence and co-management amongst linguistically and culturally diverse tribes over vast managed Aboriginal estates. These codes of conduct 'of common law' were upheld for millennia and within my lifetime have become corrupted by the pursuit of money by misguided co-opted leadership who are prepared to sacrificed the sacredness of our lands and waters.

In the Kimberley we are missing important opportunities to discuss and debate information on the lessons learnt from community engagement. The evidence is overwhelming and important for public debate. The evidence is being generated from information and events which are emerging from the political and community context. This context needs the new talking and community actions to be inclusive of the political, scientific and industry processes. Many regional Australians are growing restless as the barriers to local and regional governance showcase examples of



Aerial Photo: Destruction and clearing of native vegetation and habitat near Walmadany James Price Point. Image supplied.

unethical and in some situations the potential illegal behaviours of these corporations who are under scrutiny from ordinary Australians and international visitors and nation states. Many ordinary Australian and international visitors who are standing up for Walmadany, James Price Point have been criminalised for making a stand for 'The Kimberley' environmental, cultural and natural heritage. There is a growing cry from local people for democratic procedural fairness. This fairness and equal playing field will not be entertained as long as those who are championing this naked greed remain entrenched in competing conflicts of interests. Their actions are safely buffeted by legislation and poor public policy and practice which paint a morbid picture of growing community concern and mistrust. Government officials, statesmen and women and misguided Aboriginal leaders appear corrupted by processes which are contra-indicated to building and nurturing civil societies, of liveability and diversity not easily found anywhere outside of our country.

Senior Nyikina Elder, Lucy Marshall agrees Aboriginal people with thousands of years of living on country knowledge systems managing Australian estates are calling for financial, legal and entrepreneurial support to bring together Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people in the custodianship of our national lands and waters, she is confident 'we still have a role to play'. I am advocating a 'Talking Circle' to see if we can bring some common sense, science and industry knowledge to paint a new story for 'The Kimberley'. This new story must include Aboriginal knowledge along side of the overwhelming scientific evidence produced over decades of investigation and exploration. This evidence needs to be included and overlaid with environmental, historical and cultural values to showcase the multiple values of 'The Kimberley'. There are still huge gaps in baseline data of our marine and freshwater ecology and amongst the cultural and environmental landscape as what we in 'The Kimberley' know and love as the 'hill, sea, desert and river countries'. We need to seriously consider what would be the replacement values if these assets were destroyed for current and future generations of Australians and in turn the world. How do you value the Mardoowarra, Fitzroy River? How do you determine this sacred river's replacement value? What would be the cost to repatriate one of Australia's wild rivers, its cultural and rich bio-diversity? The fact is no amount of money can build a river system with a rich and diverse habitats not found anywhere else of this planet.

In a time when we are calling for 'Constitutional Reform' for Aboriginal Australians I am advocating that it is time to redefine who we are as Australians. If we fail to redefine ourselves in these modern times with all of the important statesmen and women who can bring a common sense approach to this reform, we will have failed to act responsibly, and we will have collectively failed to prevent the destruction of Aboriginal people, their lands and waters from this Australian landscape. How soon before Aboriginal people become an 'endangered species' in a lucky country when many Australians are also down on their luck?

Dr Anne Poelina is a Nyikina traditional owner in the Kimberley. She is the Deputy President of the Broome Council and a Registered Nurse.



Anne Poelina in the March for the Tent Embassy Celebration

This photo is my worse fear. The destruction of Aboriginal people their lands and waters from this Australian landscape. I am grateful to the people of the banner to allow me make the statement, that Aboriginal Australians are quickly moving closer to becoming a threatened 'endangered species'. Image: Magali McDuffie