



## New era for Aboriginal pastoralism

Around Australia, one of today's most active buyers of pastoral properties and other significant land holdings is the Indigenous Land Corporation. The ILC is an independent Commonwealth statutory authority set up in 1993 as part of Mabo, with a mandate to acquire land for dispossessed Aborigines. In 1998 alone, the corporation spent more than \$28 million on a wide range of properties from Cape York to Perth, including two cattle stations in the Kimberley region of Western Australia. *Dennis Schulz* writes.

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**M**yrooday/Luluigui and Roebuck Plains were added to the 26 stations in that area already owned and operated by Aborigines. With further acquisitions currently in progress, it is projected that early in the new century half of the Kimberley's 94 pastoral properties will be under Aboriginal management. What effects will this change in direction have to the northern cattle industry?

"How the industry changes depends on the degree to which the new leases purchased on behalf of Aboriginal communities do or do not choose to develop a commercially viable cattle enterprise," says Paul Novelly, the WA Agriculture manager for sustainable development, and one of the Tropical Savannas CRC's research theme leaders. "You may end up with an industry with a smaller base cattle population and there needs to be a sufficiently large cattle population to ensure the retention of services associated with the pastoral industry."

### Viability of Aboriginal-run stations

Many see Aboriginal-run stations as non-productive and not economically viable. But that is not the case according to Stuart Gunning, the manager of the Kimberley Aboriginal Pastoralist's Association (KAPA), which represents 24 of Aboriginal operations. "There's a spectrum [of Aboriginal leases] that goes from very sophisticated contemporary cattle businesses, right through to those that are much smaller and simply don't have the capacity to operate commercially," he explains. "Many of them aren't really actively market-oriented but even the smallest still turn off cattle from time to time."

### Stations as homelands

Stuart Gunning says that one of the major differences between Aboriginal and traditional European operated stations is that communities of more than 200 people, most of whom see that property as their traditional homeland, often live on a particular station. Nearly 700 live on Frazier Downs south of Broome,



once known as the Lagrange Mission. While many of those in residence are involved in the cattle enterprise, some families are interested in living on the stations for social and cultural reasons, rather than in commercial activities.

These community-based stations add a new dimension to modern Australian pastoralism. Whether the property is a going commercial concern or the smallest of leases, the station management provides fresh beef for the entire community.

"Even the most commercially successful Aboriginal station has a requirement to provide 'killers'. It's a collective lease and you must provide meat to the collective owners," says anthropologist Dr Richard Davis, currently studying Aboriginal pastoralism with the Tropical Savannas CRC.

### Bringing stations back into shape

Many Aboriginal acquisitions were almost defunct properties when they were purchased. Some of the stations bought in the early '90s by ATSIC on behalf of Aboriginal groups were grossly run down after years of overstocking, with poor infrastructure and depleted cattle numbers.

In 1994 the Kimberley Aboriginal Pastoralist's Project called for an injection of sufficient funds to enable those properties to realise their full commercial potential. But when it became known that a figure of \$25

million was required to fulfil that task, KAPA was brought in. “A sum like that was outside what was likely to be found by any government agency,” says Stuart Gunning. “So we’re looking to see what can be done with the injection of much more modest sums of money.”

Unlike traditional properties operated commercially by large concerns or families, the workforces on all Aboriginal stations are paid by the CDEP (Community Development Employment Project: or “work for the dole”).

Many older Aborigines living on the properties once also worked as stockmen in the days when Aboriginal ringers formed the backbone of the industry. Some of them have now taken over management roles.

### Training stockmen

“There’s not one white manager on any of our member stations,” says Lloyd Tucker, the landcare projects officer for KAPA. “They are all Aboriginal managed.” Many of the new managers have taken courses developed to train them in modern pastoral management techniques. A course was developed in Brisbane by Resource Consultative Services called “Grazing for Profit,” and

repackaged for Aboriginal use by the Management Services Unit in Broome, re-titling it, “Station Business.”

“They’re currently training their third group,” says Paul Novelly. “It is hoped that by the end of this year most Aboriginal leases will have one or more community members who have taken this course.” Social changes are also taking place on station communities. Richard Davis is studying the shift from European to Aboriginal-owned stations, and the profound changes taking place.

Aborigines are unique among the world’s indigenous pastoralists. For Australian Aborigines, pastoralism is a relatively new pursuit, while their counterparts in Zambia, Kenya, and Scandinavia enjoy centuries-old traditions.

“Aboriginal pastoralism wasn’t around 150 years ago. What has developed today has emerged over the past century of colonialism,” explains Richard Davis. “It’s no small thing taking up an operation that’s been run into the ground. To commit yourself to its success and get training to produce export quality cattle. That’s an enormous effort.”

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