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COLLABORATE INNOVATE

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Australia's most successful partnerships**

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CONNECTING WITH THE COMMUNITY

Developing research excellence in Indigenous affairs requires a commitment to collaborate with communities at every stage of the research, reports **Claire Harris**.

Asking the question, "So, what do you want from the research?" seemed a somewhat unusual start to a project working with Aboriginal tour operators in the Kimberley, in the north of Western Australia. But it shouldn't be, says Damien Jacobsen, principal research leader of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Tourism Product project for the CRC for Remote Economic Participation (CRC REP) based in Alice Springs.

"For us good practice in collaborative research means we are asking people what they want, we are being completely transparent and we are bringing them into the process so that they

understand us too," says Jacobsen.

The Tourism Product project was one of 12 projects set up under CRC REP's mandate to investigate and provide practical responses to the diverse and complex issues that drive Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participation in the economy.

The challenges underpinning efforts to increase economic participation are immense. And the first challenge is understanding that while "economic participation" may sound fairly straightforward, Western and Indigenous paradigms for what this means are very different.

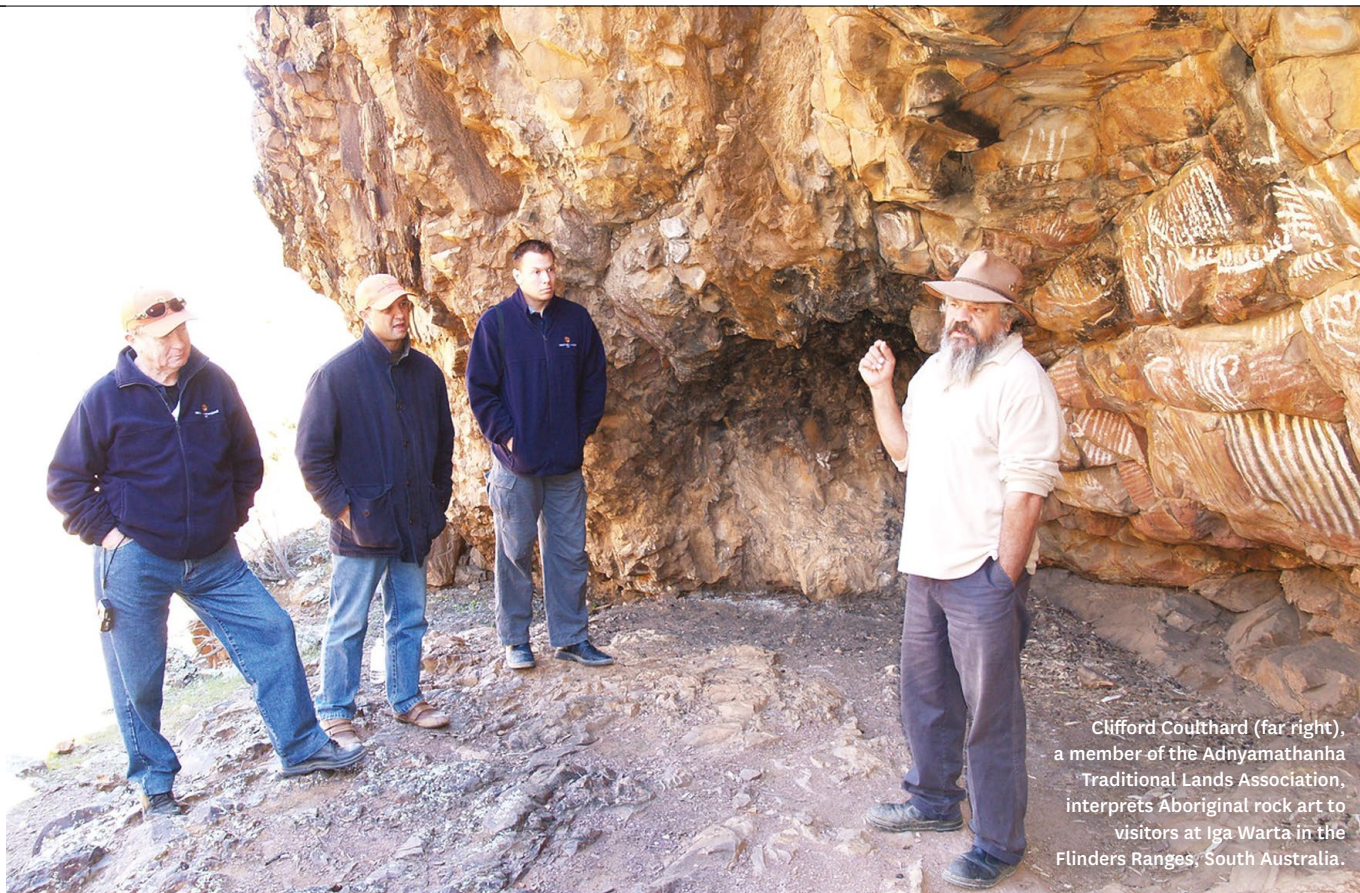
"The primary concerns for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in tourism are the wellbeing of

their people, their country and their culture," says Jacobsen.

"Being in business is the means to those ends. That's why it's important to do this background research to help businesses be smarter so that Indigenous people can achieve the goals they are working towards."

Researchers on the tourism project went to remote communities without preconceived research questions. They explored only themes that tourism business operators wanted, such as how to establish business clusters to share capacity and knowledge. The project also provided non-Indigenous stakeholders with insights into how Indigenous businesses operate.

Challenges to remote business



Clifford Coulthard (far right), a member of the Adnyamathanha Traditional Lands Association, interprets Aboriginal rock art to visitors at Iga Warta in the Flinders Ranges, South Australia.

include: being located vast distances from markets; limited human resources and support networks; extreme seasons and weather; high running costs, for example more expensive fuel and food; and limited connectivity (sometimes phone lines do not work for weeks).

“Conducting truly collaborative research in remote Australia means having a heightened awareness of what it means to be in remote Australia. And you need an appropriate amount of time and be mindful that it will take a while to get hold of people,” says Jacobsen.

A mindful and value-based approach is something that Tim Acker, principal research leader for the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art Economies project, also advocates, adding that without it, projects miss out on true collaboration and effective results.

“For example, the better projects I’ve seen have had researchers spending weeks or a couple of months getting to know people. That’s what leads to mutual success in a research project,” says Acker.

When talking about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander businesses, Indigenous art comes to most people’s minds. But despite the high profile,

“It’s so important for agencies to make sure research is going to be beneficial and not just so someone can get a PhD.”

there have been big knowledge gaps about the business of art and opportunities for growth.

Acker and the team from the Art Economies project collaborated with more than 170 art businesses, 82 out of Australia’s 87 art centres, four of the five peak bodies from various states, all eight government agencies involved in the sector, plus 900 art buyers at three national art fairs. It is an impressive rollcall. As a result, CRC REP has built the most credible dataset on the Indigenous art economy to date. Acker says this is because they invested in co-design (with longer research timeframes than usual thanks to the CRC program) and the time needed to develop relationships.

“The primary goal was returning something of value to the sector. This meant for the first couple of years we did a lot of talking. Presenting at events, meeting with people,

negotiating with people to contribute data and time,” says Acker.

Acker says that the crystal-clear focus on applying research to tangible elements (like finances and the mechanics of how the industry works) and very clear communication about what the research intended to do, was at the centre of project activities.

“The lens we started with was: why would people want to share data with us? What’s in it for them to spend time working with us when most people are often overworked, under-resourced and stressed out?” explains Acker.

A tangible benefit for art centres was receiving comprehensive data and better information tools which they can use to run their businesses more effectively. The project adapted existing computer software used in the sector and now, at the push of a button, art centre managers can see production, provenance and sales data. They can

also explore a decade of trend data and compare their centre to others across the country. The research results are part of a growing asset.

Ultimately no one knows what the final results will be, requiring an element of trust from participants. The way a project is framed – with clear communication, empathy and understanding – can make all the difference, says Gabrielle Sullivan, former manager of Martumili Artists in the Pilbara, Western Australia, and now CEO of public company Indigenous Art Code.

“Right from the beginning, I felt that the researchers understood art centres and the challenges we face, such as under-resourcing and a lack of time,” she says.

“Through really clear, concise communication it was very easy to understand what was required of us and we could see the immediate benefit of better data and information, which we could use in our business.

“We knew by contributing data, along with other art centres, this would also help paint a picture of what’s happening across Australia,” she says.

Sullivan says results from the project have helped explain why art centres are important for artists and communities. The research has also helped uncover where centres can improve, for example, in achieving gender balance among the artists connected with the centres as well as strategies to recruit and retain art centre staff.

The Art Economies project results are being widely used. The statistics of how important art is in the value chain have been useful for negotiating funding with government agencies and for accurately representing the art sector to inform the private member’s bill introduced by the Hon Bob Katter MP to federal parliament in February, says Sullivan. “It’s so important for agencies to make sure research is going to be beneficial and not just so someone can get a PhD,” she adds.

There is an underlying sense of researcher fatigue in remote communities, where people think, “Oh yes, here’s another researcher”, and Acker has some very specific advice for people wanting to embark on a collaborative journey.

“Go slowly; relationships are primary, whether at the individual, community or wider regional level,” he says.

According to Acker and Jacobsen, the key considerations for good collaborative research projects are: resources and time; researchers familiar with the sector; openness to building relationships; taking a personalised approach to participants; being visible in the community; and plenty of good and relevant communication.

Acker adds that ultimately, conducting effective collaborative research is all about straightforward human connections and giving the space and time to allow them to happen. And knowing whether you’re doing a good job can sometimes come down to the simplest of indicators.

“If people didn’t want to talk to me anymore, I would take that as a sign it wasn’t working. But where I had that ongoing relationship and the participants wanted to keep connecting, that was a sign we were on the right track,” says Jacobsen.



CRC-REP.COM/RESEARCH

GO FIGURE

200

The number of Aboriginal Community Researchers provided with training and employment in CRC REP research projects.

90%

of all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artworks sell for less than \$1,000.

21

The number of tourism operators who worked with the CRC REP to help grow their businesses.

50%

The percentage drop in the average price of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander paintings since 2005.

70%

of funding for small Indigenous art centres comes from grants.

14,000

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are working as artists.

Gabrielle Sullivan (on the roof), CEO of Indigenous Art Code, helps pack the Martumili Artists’ vehicle in the Pilbara region of Western Australia.

