

Yamatji Marlpa Barna Baba Maaja Aboriginal Corporation

Native Title Conference Reveals Impact of Mining

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Western Australia's largest native title body today called for action to relieve the pressures WA's mining boom has put on Aboriginal people of the Pilbara and Mid-West.

Speaking from the National Native Title Conference, held in Perth on the 16th anniversary of the historic Mabo decision, Simon Hawkins, CEO of the Yamatji Marlpa Barna Baba Maaja Aboriginal Corporation called for time and resources to ensure native title agreements create a strong future for traditional owners.

"There are a number of complex factors at play here, including rising cost of living in mining areas, the impact on land and culture, the pressure to rush mining negotiations and the need for unbiased monitoring after compensation agreements are signed."

Mr Hawkins said that despite mining activity, the economic benefits to regional communities have been minimal and the social impact was often negative.

"Elders have commented to us that the last mining boom in the 1960s brought families and sense of community. But today's fly-in, fly-out environment brings thousands of predominantly single men into these towns for a few days at a time, with negative social effects.

This is coupled with the rising costs of living. A three bedroom fibro shack in Port Hedland worth 50k five years ago will now sell for up to 800k. Rental properties are now over \$1500 per week. This has led to overcrowding and homelessness for the people who have lived their entire lives in these towns.

Traditional owners and their representatives are also being put under considerable pressure to attend the high volumes of mining negotiation meetings being held in the Pilbara and Mid-West. Traditional owners will often travel several days for one meeting, leaving family and work, and are then criticised if more meetings are not held on demand. The reality is that most negotiations are driven by industry agendas, without a real understanding of the needs of communities.

Our challenge is to find the time for native title groups to identify where they want to take their community's future. Once this is defined they will be in a stronger position to negotiate with industry. Agreements will then have a real chance of working," he said.

Mr Hawkins also criticised the Federal Government for its lack of consultation with traditional owners and their representatives to ensure agreements will work after they are signed.

"In recent weeks, Federal Indigenous Affairs Minister Jenny Macklin has made public statements about mining agreements between industry and indigenous groups in the Pilbara. She announced a 'small informal group of key players involved in native title issues' and asked the Mineral Council to join this group along with academics. But she has never spoken with the Aboriginal groups involved in these negotiations or us, their legal representatives.

We're very concerned by the suggestion of Government regulating compensation for Aboriginal people. The reason compensation is provided in the first place is because traditional lands are being impacted upon, irreversibly in some cases, by mining activity. We're seeing traditional country being carved up into a series of tenements. Sites and land are being destroyed, culturally and environmentally. Compensation dollars from mining shouldn't used to provide better health, education and other basic government services that all Australians have the right to expect.

Most worryingly, there has also been a recent push from the mining industry to "self monitor" the implementation of these agreements, which we consider a dangerous development, especially if supported by Government. It should be up to individual native title groups to determine what their needs are after compensation agreements are signed, and they should decide who will assist in delivering on those needs. We don't want to see a continuation of past paternalism due to government and industry placing their own values on Aboriginal people. The needs and aspirations of Aboriginal communities should be heard and respected from the start," he said.

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