

An interview with

JEREMY CLARK

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GREW UP AT THE FRAMLINGHAM

Aboriginal Trust and lived there most of my life. I'm the current General Manager of Eastern Maar Aboriginal Corporation.

In 2011 we were successful in gaining Native Title which is a shared determination with the Gunditjmara; their PBC is the Gunditj Mirring and ours is the Eastern Maar.

We have a second claim lodged with the Federal Court but it is currently on hold while we explore a settlement with the Victorian State Government. This area encompasses the Great Ocean Road down to Port Fairy and up to the Grampians National Park. It includes the Otway National park and Twelve Apostles Marine National Park.

When we lodged our second native title claim it caused a bit of reaction which was anticipated we arranged a press release and other things to allay people's fears and their

prejudice as to how they see Native Title. But we were open to working with whomever on our country to achieve a good outcome for all. Native title could actually be a benefit; traditional owners being recognised as having native title rights could actually benefit a range of people, even those who think it may not. There was some media interest; we happily spoke with them, so the reaction was overall fairly positive.

I think the hardest thing with native title, with the process, is getting the information to your own mob; to your traditional owner group and ensuring that they understand what it is and what potential outcomes there may be. Our communities have their own way of communicating with one another and there are definite factions within our communities so a lot of the time, coming together with a common goal can raise suspicions, doubts, and the like. Native Title requires a different sort of mindset as to what we're used to.

In Victoria we had a lot of Aboriginal co-operatives and people were taken from their land and put on to missions and everything else. There's been a shift from community based organisations to Traditional Owners based organisations. For many years traditional country was what co-op you were associated with or what community you were a part of so it's required a different type

of thinking. It's probably opened up a lot of old wounds and skeletons in the closet as people have had to verify their genealogy and a lot of the time there's one family history that comes through oral history; and then there's some differences when the research is done through records. It shows different things! Some people are uncomfortable with that.

I think the TO based organisations will ultimately be better; the community structure served a purpose and achieved many great things. I think we all respect where they came from but those community Co-ops were all set up in the early '80's. They achieved a lot in regards to health, housing, community programmes and community strengthening, but over the years through the funding cuts and different funding arrangements, they've all migrated to be pretty much health services like primary health services and health providers. So they don't serve the function they once did.

I think it's an ideal time for TO corporations to step into the role and TO organisations don't just look after traditional owners; a lot of historical blackfellas on our country that are from different areas, from different places; we want to ensure they're able to access services but at the same time respecting that TO's are the TO's.

I'm also involved with Victoria's Federation of Traditional Owner

Corporations which provides a collective voice for a lot of Victorian TO's. Victoria is not a large state and our people have a myriad of connections between different mobs around the state so Victorian blackfellas have come together over the years for common things. We were marching in the streets in the '60's and '70's and '80's and we have connections through people being put on various missions and locations. So we all have a connection and we have family connections as well so while each of the traditional owner groups are separate, we have those connections which enable us to be able to work together and I think the federation is a coming together of a lot of those but not all. Traditional owner corporations that have native title agreements themselves are pursuing that. It was born out of a want from us to come and talk together about common issues and problems, opportunities, to assist each other and so on. We formalised that a few years ago and that has allowed us to have a bit of a collective voice in responding to government policy and pursuing our own policy agendas and pursuing economic opportunities. There's strength in numbers! Not all of our corporations

are well resourced, some are but others have no resources, so working together and wanting to help each other is very important.

The good thing about native title is the chance to come together and be recognised as traditional owners of our country. We have always asserted our rights on our country. Our delay in pursuing native title is because we always just asserted those rights anyway. Our thoughts have shifted in that now we can see some benefits in pursuing native title; we can see that there's potential opportunities available to us which weren't there before. If we can set up a future for our younger generations so they can grow up being recognised as to who they are and strengthen and reconnect with their culture. We can provide an economic future for them. It's a pretty big step in itself because we haven't been recognised and unfortunately even groups that have had native title outcomes or agreements, they still struggle with that issue.

I suppose we have a fairly clear idea about what agenda we want to try to achieve. Native title can be different for different people and different mobs around the country and depends on

where you are. We've talked about this amongst ourselves and one of the things is just about healing our people and at the same time you want to try and secure a future for us and not be dependent on welfare and all those things. So that means exploring economic opportunities. As people say, we want jobs.

I've always seen creating jobs as the easy part. It's getting people work ready to take those jobs on. And it's hard to be work ready when your family might be dysfunctional or when none of your family has ever worked before and when there is a lack of role models and leaders within your own family; and we have a lot of single parent families.

You need to heal first. So we see that at the same time you can't lose sight of everything else you need to achieve as well. We're working through ways we can achieve that and I don't think there is any clear path but we need to heal people, families, individuals. We need to do some cultural strengthening; a lot of younger ones particularly are disconnected from our ways and culture so we need to reconnect that. We need to look after our elders and make sure that all the hard work they have put in over the years, that they get to see some reward.



Hopkins Falls, Eastern Maar country, Victoria.