

Yirrkala – Shady Beach

Yirrkala is an indigenous community about 30km from Nhulunbuy in East Arnhem Land on the Gove Peninsula. It has a population of about 1000 residents – mainly Yolngu - with local government provided by the East Arnhem Shire Council (formed by amalgamation during 2009). The Gumatj clan whose sacred totem is the saltwater crocodile, are the custodians / stewards of Shady Beach. They are charged with looking after the environment for future generations.

The Walngawu Djakamirri Surf Lifesaving club was opened in August 2009. As part of the water safety program commenced in 2007 with strong support of Surf Life Saving NT, almost 90 children have completed their Surf Rescue Certificate. Many have been awarded Bronze Medallions.

A key feature of Shady Beach is the shade provided close to the water's edge by a number of magnificent trees. These trees were almost lost after 600mm of rain fell in 24 hours some years ago. Water build up behind the dunes decreased their height by over 1.2 metres and washed sand from under the tree roots. This provides a timely reminder that the back of dunes is often as important as the side facing the ocean.

Community Action and Partnerships

Key partnerships are between the East Arnhem Shire Council, Dhimurru Aboriginal Corporation and the NT Land Council and local community – including the Yirrkala Primary School. The Australian Government has provided significant funding for the water safety and life saving programs. Park rangers maintain safe swimming conditions – crocodiles and stingers.

The Nhulunbuy SLSC and Surf Life Saving, NT (based in Darwin) have been instrumental in establishing the Yirrkala Shady Beach SLSC. As an early initiative about 30 nippers were able to go to Bondi Beach in 2009.

The Laynhapuy Homelands Association holds their Annual General Meeting on Shady Beach. The primary school uses the beach for education eg English and Mathematics lessons – and for sport and leisure activities. Local elders teach bush and sea craft – fishing and boating - to the children. Indigenous women's support group aims to reduce domestic violence and drinking problems.

The Corporation's Banana plantation provides strong support as a successful local industry growing and exporting bananas. The school children showed their fondness for local bananas by devouring a couple of cases at the bar-b-q lunch. Local Industry support has provided a large shipping container for use as a storage facility and temporary Yirrkala SLSC Club House.

The Yirrkala Buku-Larrnggay Mulka Art Centre and Museum provide strong support in maintaining the cultural heritage of the local community. Centre staff and volunteers teach bark painting and other traditional crafts to children and adults.

There is strong local media and ABC NT support with an ABC Radio documentary being produced on the Women's Action Group

Dame Phyllis Frost Litter Prevention

No litter observed on beach or along roadsides before or during visit. Yirrkala is affected by litter from Indonesia, PNG and TSI but regular Shire Services clean pick up any litter. Shire Councils officers use loud hailers to regularly broadcast litter reduction messages to the community. Consideration within the school and community programs of the long life of plastics and emu parades by children after outdoor functions could increase the understanding of the problem posed by light plastic eg foam cups which can be blown into the sea. The proposed closure of the community landfill and some simple form of litter barrier / collection device on the local creek as it enters the lagoon should further prevent litter problems in the beach environment.

Resource Recovery & Waste Management

A private contractor is authorised to collect organic materials from beach once each week . This material is composted and used in the local banana plantation which earns income for the community by exporting excess product to other markets.

Children use beach as part of learning environment eg counting shells of different types and discussing their names and uses. The program could benefit from placement of separate recyclable collection bins beside existing rubbish bins and locating all bins close to where people congregate and eat.

A donated shipping container donated by Rio Tinto makes a good storage shed for the SLSC.

Environment Innovation and Protection

The local park rangers protect the community and swimmers by relocating crocodiles and advising on sharks and marine stingers.

Indigenous community uses traditional controlled burning when appropriate. They recognised the value of the shade trees and spent months ensuring they survived after washout of the dune system following a major rain event.

Indigenous community remains committed to the preservation of the natural environment though its long-held culture and practices. The introduction of foods and drinks in non-traditional plastic and metal containers requires some additional understanding as management of these non-biodegradable materials cannot follow traditional practices.

Water Conservation

Stormwater harvesting occurs naturally as water flows to a large, natural billabong which does not dry out even in long dry seasons. The grasses and reeds filter and purify the billabong water to potable standard. With high monsoon rainfalls and the billabong, no water conservation practices have been necessary. The population size is commensurate with the natural water supply. A simple gross pollutant trap on the creek could prevent potential contamination of the billabong by waste materials.

Energy Innovation

The Bunuwal Industrial Corporation is considering the establishment of a local wind farm to provide electricity for the community.

Heritage and Culture

The traditional strong indigenous culture of affinity with the earth is well maintained despite the influence of Europeans since the Methodist mission was established in 1935. This is reflected in the two traditional bark hangings in the Buku-Larrnggay Mulka Art Centre at Yirrkala. These were painted to reflect indigenous story of the “beginnings’ as the equivalent of Genesis in the Bible. Elders still pass on the knowledge about traditional bark paintings, totem carvings and other crafts to the children.

The indigenous community respects not only the beach but also the air (heavens), ocean, land behind the beach and native people, flora and fauna. The sea and ocean has a particularly strong influence on the Yolungu . Recently, a large melaleuca was felled (with a chain saw!) and then hewn by young hands out with small axes. The canoe was then fired with burning twigs and bark to finish the canoe (*Lipalipa*). The work was undertaken by the youth under the watchful eye of an elder who chanted and sang as of tradition during the work. The youth were then taught how to sail and fish. This boat is used in the annual *Garma Festival of Traditional Cultures*. The boat making (and other stories) were included on a video production – available on DVD- which was supported by the Yothu Yindi Foundation.

Elders are involved in a range of school programs related to the beach heritage and culture of the Yolungu.

Young Legends

The school brought the children to the beach where they played Australian Rules Football and ran races. The presence of marine stingers prevented them from swimming. However, their joyful laughter and chat highlighted the traditional Aussie young legends in their formative years. Holders of Bronze Medallions are already young legends who can consume numerous sausages, bananas and flavoured drinks.