

# *Boys from the Bush*

## A social enterprise program for young Indigenous people using the distillation and sale of eucalyptus and melaleuca oils

It is evident that a significant number of young offenders are failing to respond to standard forms of intervention. Indeed, a number of studies have shown that detention and a number of pre and post-court community-based programs actually contributed to an increase in offending behaviour. Accordingly, there is the need for more effective ways of dealing with young offenders.

The Boys from the Bush social enterprise program has proven to be highly effective in diverting young indigenous offenders from Cape York Peninsula and the Torres Strait, from penetrating deeper into the Youth Justice System.

This program is designed for young Aboriginals and Torres Strait Islanders aged between 14 and 20 years who are experiencing behavioural problems, including; recidivist offending, drug and alcohol abuse, family violence, suicidal behaviour and general apathy. It is particularly effective in dealing with repeat property offences.

It is often the case that effective crime reduction programs also reduce a number of other anti-social and self-harming behaviours. It is therefore not surprising to hear from young participants, parents, Aboriginal Elders and many community service providers, that a number of young people involved in this program have given up smoking tobacco, reduced or ceased their drug and alcohol intake (including petrol and aerosol sniffing), reducing or ceasing their suicidal thoughts and behaviour, and reduced or ceased their physical and verbal abuse towards people, including police, teachers and parents.

This program uses a socio-economic enterprise as the means to break the unemployment / welfare dependent / passivity / apathy / boredom / drug and alcohol abuse and crime cycle. The enterprise is also used as means of assisting young people with the transition from boyhood to manhood, as well as from play to work.

This program revolves around such things as the development of work skills, production of commodities, enterprise development, income

supplement, communication skills, community integration, location for culture, location for youthful expressions of excitement and desire for adventure, effective social control, environmental change, and a combination of education, personal counselling and narrative therapy.

This program is comprised of three interactive components. They are:

- 1) engagement in a combined treatment and socio-education group;
- 2) the opportunity to leave home and peers and to camp in the bush; and
- 3) engagement in a socio-economic enterprise and work skills training.

These interactive components are designed to modify the anti-social and self-harming behaviour of selected young indigenous people, in addition to providing important social and practical competencies.

These three interactive components are now explained.

### **INVOLVEMENT IN A COMBINED TREATMENT AND SOCIO-EDUCATION GROUP**

Young participants in this Boys from the Bush program are required to attend open ongoing weekly group meetings. These meetings are divided into two parts. The first part is devoted to lectures, discussions and debates on a range of topics from politics, law, history, environment, engines, drugs and alcohol to first aid. The second part is devoted to discussions about business enterprise. These meetings are conducted in a semi-formal manner.

Group work has a number of advantages over casework. Individuals are usually more relaxed when amongst their peers and this gives rise to more open and spontaneous interactions. These spontaneous free-flowing interactions are often rich in statements that contain problem-packed personal beliefs, attitudes and assumptions. The significance of these problem-packed statements are often left unchallenged or unquestioned by peers. It is the role of the group worker to help the group explore the implications these beliefs may have on individuals, the group, and the wider community. The group worker helps participants gain a fuller understanding about problems formation and how certain beliefs, attitudes and assumptions, prevent new approaches from being tried and how they block possible solutions to long-standing problems experienced by many individuals, families and communities.



Young participants are first introduced to the program as a program that helps children grow into proud, respectful and strong young men. They are told that people who are always “off their face” with drugs and alcohol and break into people’s home, steal people’s property, assault and rob people in the streets, are weak-minded, lazy people who have no respect for themselves or others, and are too weak to weak to earn their money the “proper” way. They are told that “true” Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men do not do these things. They are proud, strong, respectful and hard working people and they do not go about committing crimes.

From this narrative, young participants are given the opportunity to choose how they want to behave by working hard, picking and distilling eucalyptus leaves, and earning their money the proper way.

## **THE OPPORTUNITY TO LEAVE HOME AND PEERS AND TO CAMP IN THE BUSH**

### **Going Bush**

Young people often say they got into trouble because they were bored and went looking for some excitement. The Boys from the Bush program does offer young people some excitement by going on regular challenging bush work camps.

Popular culture has it that we are a nation of hard working, independent, proud and innovative people, who love the outdoor environment. Many of our folk heroes, both black and white, were tough workmen, bushmen, seamen and warriors. They were imbued with the spirit of survival, who prized kinship and mateship and were dismissive of authority and social pretension. Similarly, many people believe that Aboriginal people have an inbuilt affinity for the land. They are seen to be at one with the bush and the natural environment.

The reality is that most of the young people eligible for this program have had very little or no experience with the bush. They are highly dependent, irresponsible, often afraid of the isolation, scared of the dark, dislike hard work and have difficulty in coping without their home comforts. A number of them also have a disturbing appetite for killing any and all bush creatures in the cruellest ways, and they give little consideration to maintaining a clean environment.

Like outstations, this program places young people back on the land, but unlike outstations they are always on the move and kept busy producing eucalyptus and melaleuca oil.



Camping rough in the bush can aid in the personal development of some young people in a number of ways. The very harshness of the bush environment, its discomforts and challenges, are used to develop the life-enhancing qualities of self-control, self-reliance, endurance and cooperation.

Participants are introduced to the basics of camping in the bush. They are taught about essential equipment, loading and unloading the vehicle, vehicle safety and maintenance, setting up a camp, camp security, constructing shelter, laying out a swag, camp and personal hygiene, lighting, making a fire, fire safety, food and water management, nutrition, bush foods, cooking, appropriate clothing, basic first aid, tying knots, orienteering, bushwalking, observational skills, environmental awareness and camp fire story telling. These are some of the many skills and attributes developed or practiced by young people attending these work camps.

In these ways, camping rough in the bush can be of significant benefit to certain young people. It provides them with knowledge and experiences they would not normally gain and may provide some young people with new interests.

The opportunity to go camping in the bush has another important function for the group leader. Working, eating and sleeping alongside young participants day after day provides the group leader with an excellent opportunity to get to know the young participants' characters and their individual strengths and weaknesses. With this knowledge the group leader is able to model good, effective leadership and pro-social behaviours more effectively, which includes the necessity for any immediate guidance, counselling or support.

A number of researchers argue that effective group need both task leadership, that is, someone who can get the job done, and good socio-emotional leadership, that is, someone who can lift the spirits of the young participants and provide them with psychological comfort and a sense of security and reassurance. At the heart of good socio-emotional leadership lies 'empathy'. The depth of empathy best suited for this program is something that is not easily learnt. The program requires a genuine understanding, at a deep level, of the inner reality of the life and times of the young participants. There is an imperative need to understand their nature, perceptions, thoughts and feelings. To gain this depth of understanding, you need to have experienced in one form or another, their inner reality. Without sufficient appreciation of the young person's life experience, good and even clever interventions can fail, because the worker and the intervention are not sufficiently in tune with the young person's subjective reality.

## **Leaving Home and Peers**

Noel Pearson, a prominent Aboriginal leader from Cape York, upholds that the nature and extent of Aboriginal family and community problems on Cape York Peninsula are horrendous.

*“It is a sad but clear fact that Aboriginal society on Cape York Peninsula is not a successful society. There are numerous indications that demonstrate that our communities are severely dysfunctional.”*

Noel goes on to say:

*“Despite the fact that ours is one of the most dysfunctional societies on the planet today (surely the fact that the per capita consumption of alcohol on Cape York is the highest in the world says something about the fact of our dysfunction) there is almost no discourse about why this is so, and what might be necessary to change this situation.”*

The Boys from the Bush program recognises that much of the socially disruptive and self-harming behaviours exhibited by young people living on Cape York Peninsula are the product of their environment.

Research has shown that poor parental supervision (which includes erratic or harsh discipline, parental conflict, parental rejection and low parental involvement in the child’s activities) is the best predictor of offending behaviour. We also know that peer influence is an important factor, as most crimes tend to be committed in small peer groups rather than alone. We also know that most crimes committed by young people from Cape York Peninsula are drug and alcohol related.

Take for example the following statement made by a 17 year old Aboriginal boy from Mossman Gorge Aboriginal Community:

*“You can’t stop the drinking here, it’s too strong. If you want to stop others will force you into it. You can’t say no, they will make you. If you don’t drink with them they think bad of you. The only way to stop is to get out of this place.”*

In the absence of being able to bring about any immediate change in family and community behaviour, it is important to provide young people with the opportunity to remove themselves from these drinking circles, and subsequent anti-social behaviour. If a young person is entrenched in anti-social behaviour, and refuses to leave these drinking circles, the Courts, Community Elders Justice Group or any other recognised community agency can direct the young person to participate in the program.



Camping, by its very nature, requires the campers to leave behind their everyday lives, which can free them from the inhibitions of their normal environment, including any immediate social problems they may have. At the very least, this controlled bush camp environment can provide the young participants with a brief respite from excessive drinking, sniffing and violence, which pervade so many families and communities throughout the Cape.

Young people returning from their work camp say that they feel physically and psychologically healthier.

These bush camps are under the control of carefully selected indigenous and non-indigenous adult supervisors who model pro-social behaviours. This has been an important factor in achieving and maintaining the program's success in the past and will remain a key factor in its successful implementation in other Cape communities.

## **INVOLVEMENT IN ENTERPRISE DEVELOPMENT AND WORK SKILLS TRAINING**

Going camping in the bush has in fact no impact on the prevailing structural conditions that are so often the cause of these social problems in Cape York communities, from where offending behaviour emanates. The young participants will return from their work camp to a world often characterised by drug and alcohol abuse, violence,

family conflict, inadequate parenting, poor hygiene and diet, negative peer pressure, truancy, unemployment, idleness and boredom. For many young people, camping in the bush is simply a brief, albeit sometimes enjoyable and challenging interval to an otherwise gloomy, sometime miserable existence.

This is where the Boys from the Bush program is unique. It sets out to address, in a modest and very practical manner, certain structural conditions that lead some young people to offend in the first place. That is, young people often say they got into trouble because they stole things that they could not afford to buy. This program provides young people with an income or income supplement and marketable work skills.

Most young people who are eligible for this program come from at least two generations of welfare dependent families and have little or no work experience. This program teaches the young participants how to work efficiently and effectively. It trains them into a routine of working during the day and sleeping at night, early to bed and early to rise, teamwork and problem solving. They are also introduced to the “real” market economy. That is, the relationship between profitable work or production and income.

To this end, the young participants are taught how to assemble and operate a portable steam distillation plant for the extraction of bush eucalyptus and melaleuca oils. They are taught the physics of steam distillation and the design and construction of a steam distillation plant. Participants are also taught about the different oil bearing species of eucalypt and melaleuca, the medicinal, cosmetic and industrial uses of certain oils, different types and qualities of oils, and basic information about the eucalyptus and tea tree oil industry.



Boys from the Bush eucalyptus oils are not mixed. They are sold separately as a pure species product. The young participants sell their pure oils to locals and tourists from their market stalls in Cairns and Port Douglas. All of the profits are shared according to individual productivity. They are taught about marketing aspects, labelling, price formation, operational efficiency and selling methods.

In order to directly sell their oils to the public, they must learn how to communicate effectively with different people from all walks of life and from all over the world. There is no room for irresponsible behaviour, laziness, shyness or ideas about this being a “shame job”. They must learn to sell themselves as well as their product. This forms a system of social relations based upon productivity. Through this process, they are integrating themselves into their local community and standing on equal terms alongside other small-business stall owners. Quite often, the Boys from the Bush stall will make more money than most other comparable market stalls.



The Boys from the Bush program has a strong anti-welfare philosophy based upon the fact that non-reciprocal benefits to able-bodied people can and does have the effect of robbing them of their dignity, autonomy and ingenuity. This type of welfare can and does detach many people from their family and community. Young people in this program are required to pay for most of their ongoing production costs, to partly experience the economic realities of needing to budget and prioritise resources in order to compete effectively in the market place. However, the social goals of this program will always take priority over profit, and therefore the program will never be fully self-funding.

Another important aspect of this program is its promotional campaign. Advertising improves oil sales. It also improves the public image of the young participants. Most people will admire a group of young, disadvantaged, indigenous Australians who are working hard to make some money for themselves, by producing and selling a uniquely Australian medicinal and cosmetic product, first discovered by their ancestors 40,000 years ago. An added attraction is that the product is pure and natural and has been handpicked, causing minimal harm to the environment. When young people become involved in this program, they immediately acquire this positive public image, which in turn improves the way these young participants perceive themselves. After all, our personal identities are to a large extent derived from the way in which we are perceived and treated by other people. The young participants can easily see that in order to maintain their newly acquired positive public image that it is important for them to keep out of trouble. To help this along, their weekly group sessions include progressive educational topics such as:

problem-oriented approaches versus solution-oriented approaches, finding and making opportunities, creativity and resourcefulness, identification and exploitation of resources, indigenous technical knowledge and skills, and learning by working.

The more mature members of the program are often invited to give public presentations about their enterprise. This not only provides them with a new experience, but it also further integrates them into their local community and the development of pro-social behaviours.

Referrals to the Boys from the Bush program can be made from any source, including Elders Justice Groups, courts, state and territory youth justice services, schools and families. The program receives young people on supervised court orders who are failing to respond to standard models of service delivery. It also allows for certain young people who are unwilling to complete their community service orders in the conventional manner, to go bush with the other young participants to help them make their oils. The hours they work are deducted from their orders, while the other participants receive the benefit of their labour. This mixing of young people on different Youth Justice orders has no, so called, 'contamination' effect on the other participants and it has proved to create a highly effective interactive environment.

A video of the Boys from the Bush program is available from:

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