Quop Maaman: Aboriginal Fathering Project

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Information Sheet Five

Indigenous men on the move again

Aboriginal fathers have traditionally taken a leading role in the lives of their families. Today, however, we are constantly confronted by subtle and not so subtle images of Aboriginal men as dangerous forces who threaten the health, wellbeing and sexual vulnerability of children. Underlying many policy approaches to ‘Indigenous affairs’ is a powerful narrative that suggests Aboriginal men have largely lost their culture and spirituality, their family influence and capacity to care for their children through exposure to generations of western influence.

In spite of this, there is good evidence that many Aboriginal men are keen on rebuilding their roles as fathers, brothers, uncles and grandfathers. There is also good evidence that a growing group are very actively involved in ‘culture’. ABS data from 2008 demonstrates very high levels of involvement in Indigenous ceremony with 24% of Aboriginal people 15 years or older having attended an Indigenous ceremony in the 12 months prior. Almost half (47%) had been to an Indigenous funeral. Those in remote areas were three times as likely to attend a ceremony compared to those in non-remote areas. In the 2008 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Survey, 65% of children and young people claimed to have been to one or more selected cultural events (fishing and hunting, ceremonies, and NAIDOC events) in the previous year. Almost all young people (98%) said that they would like to
participate in cultural events and cultural activities. Of these 22% did so at least once a month, 29% did so several times a year, and 16% did so once a year\(^1\).

According to the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Survey (NATSISS), language and culture is having great influence. In 2008 19% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people aged 15 years and over and 13% of children (3–14 years) spoke an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander language. In 2008 72% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people aged 15 years or over reported recognising a particular area as their homelands or traditional country. In 2008, almost one-third (31%) of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children spent at least 1 day a week with an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leader or elder\(^2\).

This connection with Indigenous culture aligns with an Aboriginal language and cultural revival that is occurring across the world. Since the 1970s this global revival has been so strong that significant numbers of young people are now able to learn about culture, language, and spirituality in formal school settings. For example, Māori-language education systems have been established throughout New Zealand. This allows whānau (families) to choose from Māori medium bilingual classrooms and Māori immersion options for their children’s education\(^3\). The old traditions of establishing wānanga (houses of learning) has been revived in universities; and kōhanga reo (preschools) and kura kaupapa Māori (schools) use the Māori language to educate younger learners. In 2006 the national census recorded 131,613 Māori as being able to hold a conversation in the language\(^4\).

A little like the Western Desert idea of Kanyirninpa, whanaungatanga is the term used to describe an intergenerational support process that is fundamental to all relationships with and between Māori. In these learning environments, Indigenous men are exercising their cultural responsibilities by passing on their cultural knowledge and educating their young\(^5\). Here it is not only the content of education that is important, it is also the fact that it

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2. ABS, 2011.
happens through relationships between the young, middle aged and old\textsuperscript{6}.

Aboriginal men are now leading projects that involve young people travelling with other generations to reacquaint themselves with their country, family (both living and dwelling as spirits), and stories/knowledge. This access to traditional lands has been made possible through the establishment of Aboriginal organisations, negotiation of native title and heritage, tourism enterprises, partnerships with mining companies, and setting up land and sea management regimes on boodjar (Noongar), ngurra (Western Desert groups), nunavut (Inuktitut from North America), and whenua (Māori from New Zealand)\textsuperscript{7}.

For example, in Australia more than 770 Aboriginal rangers are employed in around 95 ranger teams\textsuperscript{8}. This work includes managing threatened wildlife; monitoring feral animals, weeds, and marine debris; and looking after significant cultural sites. Aboriginal rangers have become an important way of transmitting cultural and spiritual knowledge, recording places of significance, song, dance, and the stories of elders. This has enabled young people to take up paid work, mentor younger groups (through junior ranger projects), and visit traditional country with more senior people. Critically this access to country has played a strong role in supporting men's work across the generations\textsuperscript{9}.

Like language revival, this re-acquaintance with country movement is finding its way into schools across the globe. In Canada since 1996, Aboriginal young people living in remote and isolated communities have been able to participate in school programs in conjunction with adult rangers, experiencing traditional culture, lifestyle, and, by definition, spirituality. This is also occurring in northern and central parts of Australia with the formation of Junior Ranger programs. Key elements of the work includes training in traditional practices seen as primary in the formation of responsible Aboriginal fathering and healthy cultural transmission (such as the skills to live off the land, traditional sports, arts, and ecological values)\textsuperscript{10}.


\textsuperscript{10} Schwab, R. G. (2006). Kids, skidoo and caribou: the junior Canadian ranger program and as model for re-engaging indigenous