

Resources giants digging deep to involve indigenous communities

Time for Aborigines to share in the boom

AFTER decades of ambivalent relations with indigenous people in the north, resources companies are now becoming involved in realistic programs which, given half a chance, could overcome the disengagement with economic development that characterises many Aborigines.

The huge multi-billion-dollar gas contracts being signed for the offshore Kimberley and the billions of dollars committed to expansion of the Pilbara iron ore industry are set to change the way in which remote Aboriginal communities are treated.

Historically, Aboriginal employment by resources companies operating in the region has been unskilled and mainly related to heritage issues and rehabilitation of sites.

This month BHP Billiton signed a \$300 million contract with Ngarda Civil & Mining to manage its 2 million tonne a year Yarric iron ore mine, 200km northeast of Port Hedland, for five years.

Woodside Petroleum has just signed a \$107 million contract with the Ngarda Alliance (Ngarda Civil & Mining and Leighton Contractors) to help build its Pluto liquefied natural gas development in the Pilbara.

The significance is that the Pilbara has traditionally had around 50 per cent of its Aboriginal population registered as unemployed — with all the social problems that brings.

Ngarda, established about six years ago, is now the biggest Aboriginal company servicing the mining sector and, while around 50 per cent of its people are non-indigenous, its reputation as an organisation that can compete with more established operations is well and truly deserved.

When Don Voelte became managing director of Woodside in April 2004, he very quickly discovered that Australia's biggest single resources develop-

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ment — the North West Shelf gas project which Woodside manages — was not a large employer of indigenous people.

A year later, the native Nebraskan made the point that he believed Woodside had a responsibility to have more than three indigenous employees.

Today, the company has 101 Aboriginal employees after scouring Australia for qualified engineers, geologists and geophysicists.

But the real significance of Voelte's attitude revolves around the fact that the Kimberley has around 5000 Aborigines and relatively few non-indigenous residents.

Put simply, it's a no-brainer that companies such as Woodside, in their consideration of the costs of huge natural gas developments off the Kimberley coast, should look to labour from the local region.

Locals are involved with the place in which they live and therefore have a greater awareness of the significance of what they are doing and its contribution to regional development.

A number of resources companies in the north — Woodside, Rio Tinto, BHP and Andrew Forrest's Fortescue Metals Group among them — are working towards long-term solutions to Aboriginal issues.

Strategies being developed might result in children as young as four and five being taught about nutrition and personal health.

That's a first step towards more cohesive families and the possibility that exposure to permanent employment might stim-

ulate Aboriginal parents to encourage their offspring to complete school and go on to university.

It might seem to be a government responsibility but the evidence is that government programs are failing.

BHP's decision to contract Ngarda is part of a conscious plan to help the region's indigenous people break free of the welfare cycle.

BHP Billiton Iron Ore president Ian Ashby put the point very clearly: "In future years, I believe we will look back at this as a turning point in the improvement of long-term opportunities for indigenous people in the Pilbara."

Ngarda executive chairman Barry Taylor said the new contract was worth much more than its face value to the indigenous people of the Pilbara.

"This will bring significant wages and salary to our people in the region and assist our community to become sustainable for the years ahead and not rely on government welfare as we have been relying so much upon in the past," he said.

West Australian Premier Alan Carpenter, who will host an Aboriginal employment forum on November 30, commented that about 14 per cent of the state's indigenous people were still unemployed when WA was basically at full employment.

"It's unacceptable and if ever there was a chance for Western Australia as a community to deal with many of the issues that stem from indigenous alienation from our economy, we are at that point now," he said.

If permanent full-time employment is achieved in Aboriginal communities, it may well be the biggest long-term benefit to the nation from the resources boom.