

House of Representatives Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs

Inquiry into language learning in Indigenous communities

Wangka Maya Pilbara Aboriginal Language Centre}

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Contact: Manager Nadine Hicks 

1. What are the languages spoken in your community?

There are 31 languages in the Pilbara region:

Martu Wangka A6

Yinhawangka A48

Niyaparli A50

Putijarra A54

Palyku A55

Nyangumarta A61

Warnman A62

Karajarri A64

Burduna W24

Pinikura W34

Ngarluma W38

Ngarla W40

Manjilyjarra A51.1

Kartujarra A51

Banyjima A53

Nyamal A58

Mangala A65

Yulparija A67

Juwaliny A88

Tharrkari W21

Bayungu W23

Thiin W25

Thalanyji W26

Jiwarli W28

Nhuwala W30

Jurruru W33

Martuthunira W35

Kurrama W36

Yindjibarndi W37

Kariyarra W39

Yapurarra W47

2. How well are they spoken by children, adults and elders?

This varies widely. While some languages such as Thiin are no longer spoken at all, others such as Martu Wangka are widely spoken by all age groups. Detailed information for each language is available on request.

3. Describe your group and project?

Wangka Maya was begun by a group of Pilbara language speakers who were concerned at the loss of languages. It aims to record and foster the Aboriginal languages of the Pilbara region. The group began with no funding working as volunteers. Gradually they attracted project funding and eventually ongoing funding as a language centre.

a) Why was it important to start up?

Almost no work was being done to record or foster the use of local languages.

b) How long have you been running?

Since 1987

c) What age group(s) are you working with?

All ages.

d) How many people are involved?

In any one year, about 1000 people are likely to be involved.

4. What activities do you do to record or encourage the use of languages, including local languages?

Activities include recording language, compiling dictionaries and grammars, producing other resources such as learning resources, story books, plant books, CDs, DVDs, etc. In addition we support school programs, promote awareness of language, culture and history and are actively involved in reconciliation activities.

a) How are local schools involved?

We support local schools through the development of language resources for children, running language nests with pre-school children and working in partnership with schools to raise awareness of language, culture and history. For example, South Hedland Primary School has partnered with us and the Museum of Australian Democracy to develop and promote the exhibition Marnti Warajanga, now on display at Old Parliament House, Canberra.

b) What help do you receive from the government or other organisations to carry out your activities?

We receive approximately \$600,000 from MILR annually and also seek donations of \$1000-\$10,000 from native title trusts, philanthropic foundations and industry to assist with publication costs.

c) Can you describe how your project's activities may have helped the whole community?

Wangka Maya's activities and established presence in the Pilbara community has contributed significantly to reconciliation and raising awareness of local language and culture. We have documented languages where the elders have since passed away and no speakers are left. Descendants are now reclaiming these languages, contributing to community cohesion and pride.

5. How are your languages, including your local languages taught in school?

This varies widely. Many local schools run no Indigenous language programs, while others teach a local language.

a) What difference has the teaching of local languages made to children's attendance and achievement at school?

You would need to ask the schools this question.

6. What interpreting and translating services are available in your local languages? How useful and effective are they?

No services are available. Wangka Maya has lobbied government for more than 10 years to fund a service with no success. We are constantly receiving requests for interpreting from the courts, police and health department but our funding agreement doesn't allow us to provide this service. For some years we did our best to fulfil these requests on a fee-for-service basis, but without core funding we were unable to provide sufficient training or maintain a network of interpreters. This is an extremely serious problem, which impacts negatively on the lives of many local people.

7. What are the main difficulties facing your project?

We do not have sufficient resources to adequately address language loss in the Pilbara. While MILR does provide us with more funds than many other language centres/projects, we are attempting to work with 31 languages. There is great urgency to the work as many knowledgeable elders are passing away.

8. What are you aiming to achieve in the future?

Ideally we would like to collect and maintain extensive documentation of all 31 Pilbara languages, meet community demand for resources including learning materials and undertake more activities to promote the use of languages.