

Aborigines, bauxite and gold

By Richard Howitt

Recent developments in Australia have seen indigenous peoples' native title recognized as a legitimate prior title in many places where Australia's mineral wealth is located. This has created a challenging new setting for decision-makers in resource industries. This article examines the situation in two of Australia's major mineral export industries, bauxite and gold, and concludes that the changes underway will finally give Aboriginal Australians standing in the nation's land and resource management systems.

For successive generations of non-Aboriginal people, Australia's remote resources have represented enviable opportunities for nation building. In many people's eyes, the most important contribution of the minerals and energy industries to national development has been their investment in the concrete icons of 'development' in hostile Australia landscapes – new mines, towns, railways, ports, roads, pipelines and communications infrastructure. Throughout the history of resource development on this continent, state, territory and national governments have used their sovereign ownership of natural resources to intervene in the processes of economic development to achieve policy goals. While the specific goals have changed, often dramatically, the link between Crown ownership of resources, and the nurtur-

ing of 'national development' has not. By-and-large, the validity of this position has not been widely questioned. In the metropolitan mainstreams of urban Australia, the link between remote resource projects and personal prosperity continues to entrench the relevance of 'out-back' myths and metaphors as central in the construction of Australians' national identity.

Viewed from "the other side of the frontier", these processes look quite different. Rather than representing a process of nation building and national self-realization, the history and geography of Australia's resource frontiers confront many Aboriginal populations with legacies of violence, alienation, dependence, dispossession, marginalization, social disintegration and displacement. Resource-based activity has not delivered the 'ben-



Dr Howitt teaches Human Geography at the School of Earth Sciences, Macquarie University, New South Wales, 2109. He has been involved in action-research addressing the social impacts of mining on Aboriginal peoples in many parts of Australia.

efits of development' to local Aboriginal people affected by resource projects. Nor have Aboriginal perspectives on frontier experience been widely understood by non-indigenous Australians. In particular, strong advocates of resource-based, project-centered national and regional development strategies have often aimed to exclude concerns raised by or about Aboriginal people from both general policy debates and specific project approvals. This has contributed to the development of a dominant corporate culture in which indigenous concerns have

been constructed as outside the core concerns of resource companies.

Judicial acceptance of native title in the High Court's historic Mabo decision¹, has forced many non-indigenous Australians to recognize, generally for the first time, that the land and resources central to Australian identity were, and in some cases still are, encumbered by legitimate prior claims. While the history of the resources frontiers cannot be undone, we need to ensure that it is neither misrepresented nor repeated. To quote the Prime Minister, the Mabo decision

and the Native Title Act 1993 provide a framework for:

a new and better relationship between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians (which gives) ... the indigenous people of Australia at last, the standing they are owed as seminal contributors to our national life and culture ... and the standing they are owed as victims of grave injustices

(Paul Keating, Second Reading Speech, Native Title Bill, 16 November 1993).

To put this framework into practice, however, public debate must be able to re-evaluate the lessons of history, and to re-open those issues which, if left unaddressed, place at risk both minerals and energy production and indigenous Australians' aspirations for improved futures. We also need to recognize that indigenous Australians' aspirations to control, influence and benefit from decisions about resources on, in and of their traditional estates are longstanding – they are clearly not a product of the Mabo decision.

Drawing on research on gold and bauxite production in several regions², this paper argues that a clearer understanding of 'both sides' of the frontier is a crucial step towards effective participation in the resolution of both specific legal claims to native title, and other unresolved grievances from the past, as well as the broader process of reconciliation.

Bauxite mines and land rights

The bauxite projects at Weipa and Gove were central to Australia's decisive move into the international aluminium industry over the past three decades. In both areas, mining leases were granted over land previously "reserved for the use and benefit of Aboriginal people". In both regions, Aboriginal people maintained an active cultural life and proprietary interest in the lands and seas involved in the projects, despite long periods of missionary activity. And in both cases, the

Table 1
Weipa Aborigines Society: Projects and programs 1973–1993,
AUD

Year	Project	Costs (AUD)
1973	Town Plan	77 000
1974	Pre-School	349 000
1976	Sewerage	751 000
1977	Roads and drainage	310 000
1978	Community Hall	125 000
1979	Accommodation for pre-school teachers	52 000
1981	Convenience Store and laundromat	180 000
1982	Alcohol rehabilitation and workshop training	260 000
1984	Useful skills training (annual operating costs)	100 000
1986	Pre-school expenses (annual costs)	65 000
1986	Training centre	108 000
1986	Fish farm feasibility study	1 000
1986	Snack bar renovation	55 000
1987	Pre-School and Training Centre operations	183 000
1988	Pre-School and Training Centre operations	213 000
1989	Pre-School and Training Centre operations	244 000
1990	Pre-School and Training Centre operations	377 000
1990	Napranum Systems Development	40 000
1991	Pre-School and Training Centre operations	543 000
1991	Napranum Systems Development	89 000
1992	Pre-School and Training Centre operations	488 000
1992	Napranum Systems Development	184 000
1993	Pre-School and Training Centre operations	341 000
1993	Napranum Systems Development	97 000

Source: Weipa Aborigines Society, Audited Financial Statements, 1981–92, unaudited accounts, 1993.

projects have influenced broader relations between Aboriginal people and mining companies in Australia.

At Weipa, exclusion of Aboriginal leaders from negotiations about the future of their land and communities in the mid-1950s was seen as neither problematic nor controversial. The impacts of the Weipa project were dramatic and regrettable. Within a decade of becoming operational, Weipa became an icon of the inability of mining to deliver benefits to local Aboriginal groups. As one tribal woman recalled, the early development and operational period at Comalco's Weipa project was a time of disorientation and vulnerability:

*Red dust in the skies,
Blinding our eyes,
White men in houses protected,
we, exposed, young girls molested
Find refuge in drinking, dreamtime
seeking.*

...
*Weipa Reserve, "Ahnang", my tribal
land,
If we knew before what we know now,
We would have said
"NO" to mining our lands.*³

Yet, in terms of mainstream regional and national development policies, Weipa quickly became an icon of industrial success.

Criticism of the project's performance on Aboriginal issues did emerge, but in

the mainstream, negative outcomes for Aboriginal people were generally treated as, to coin a phrase from a more recent resource conflict, "collateral damage" sustained in pursuit of an honourable goal. Comalco's efforts to address these concerns focussed on the Weipa Aborigines Society (WAS) and sought to depoliticize and localize the problem in the wake of the Gove Land Rights Case⁴ and the Gurindji Walk-off at the Vestey's station at Wave Hill.

Comalco has been WAS's major source of funds for its community development program, which focused first on 'bricks-and-mortar development' and more recently on 'people development' (Table 1). While the contribution of WAS is highly valued in the Aboriginal community at Napranum, it is also recognized that Comalco has dominated the basic direction of the organization, and imposed a predominantly commercial and industrial model of development success.

Recognizing the differences between Comalco and Aboriginal views of 'people development' is central to understanding the lessons of the 'Weipa experience'.

Everybody involved in the cross-cultural relationship between Comalco and Napranum agrees that 'people development' is an appropriate target for the work, but there is an increasingly sophisticated discussion of just how an Abo-

riginal-centred interpretation of this phrase will lead WAS in quite different directions (Table 2). Both the Aboriginal model and the Comalco model value Aboriginal participation, and represent a shift from earlier approaches to regional development which marginalized Aboriginal concerns.

During 1993, substantial steps were taken towards Aboriginalisation of WAS, through the establishment of a new community organization, Napranum Aboriginal Corporation. NAC provides a forum for discussion and development of strategies which do accommodate both commercial and local cultural criteria of success in the ongoing cross-cultural work at Weipa, and links the traditional owners of the mining areas with the community council and the wider Aboriginal population of the area (Figure 1).

Despite this 'success story', Weipa also provides material for less positive readings of the relationship between mining and Aborigines. In dealing with the Wik claim to lands covered by the company's mining lease south of Weipa, Comalco has become involved in a confrontation which sits uncomfortably with the much more co-operative processes evolving at Napranum.

The principles underlying the Wik claim would extend the Mabo-style principles and re-open many of the unresolved grievances of the Wik peoples, whose dispossession and displacement from their traditional estates occurred

Table 2
Different views of 'people development' at Weipa

The Comalco Side

- industrial/commercial model
- targets identified skills that are useful in industrial and commercial employment
- uses the market as measure of success
- value is measured in largely financial terms

The Aboriginal Side

- less 'centred' than the industrial/commercial model
 - focus is on Aboriginality as a strength rather than as an implied 'disability'
 - cultural sustainability important criterion in measuring success
 - community wealth seen as the most relevant measure of value
-

while they were effectively wards of a hostile and unsympathetic state.

The difficulty for Comalco, and for the mining industry generally, is that longstanding grievances such as these cannot be easily dismissed and forgotten. They are part of the real history and geography which makes up local Aboriginal identity and shapes Aboriginal responses to contemporary circumstances.

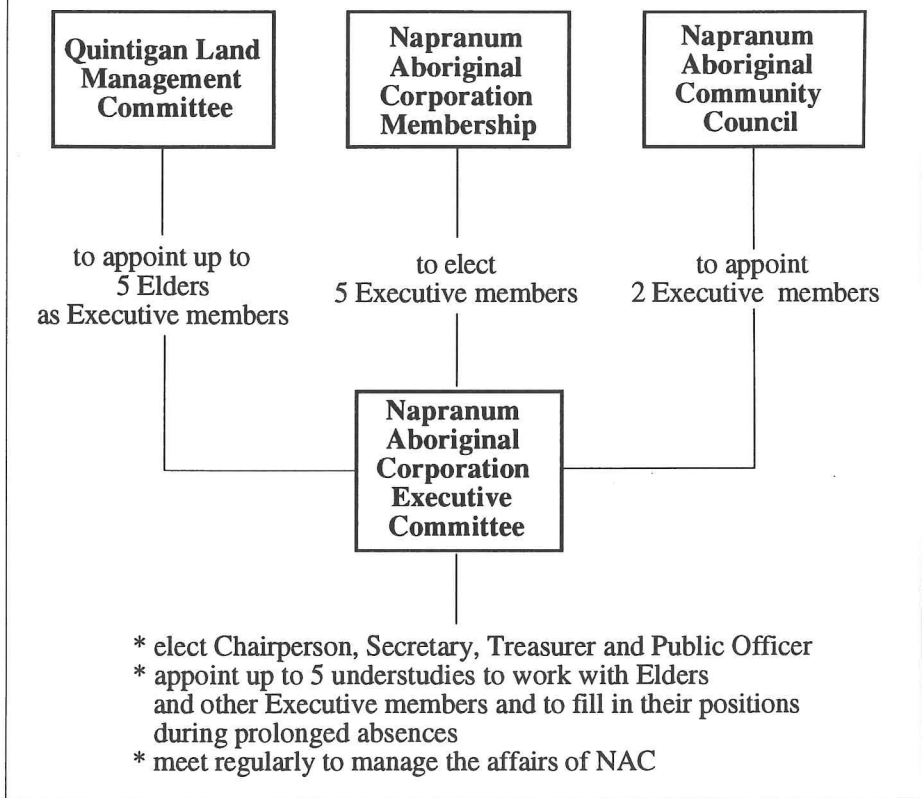
To dismiss unresolved grievances arising from frontier injustices as unwarranted, unreasonable, or somehow incomprehensible in law, is to effectively dismiss the Aboriginal people involved - it is to renew the very processes of exclusion, marginalization and alienation which underlie the present conflict.

In this case, the inescapable imperatives of markets seem to lock Comalco into a negotiating position which almost precludes re-opening of the issues which lie at the heart of the Wik claim, even though the company has publicly acknowledged that the claim is no longer a threat to its industrial expansion based on Weipa.⁵

At Gove, the Yolngu landowners consistently sought to stop the Federal Government granting mining titles over their traditional lands, first through a petition to the Federal Parliament in 1963, and later through a Supreme Court legal challenge (the Gove Land Rights Case). They never perceived that they had lost possession of their traditional estates. As the extent to which mining threatened their use and occupation of their estates became apparent, they acted decisively - consistently asserting their prior claim over and interest in the areas involved.⁶

While Nabalco and the Yolngu landowners have established a constructive relationship, the exclusion of Aboriginal people from negotiations over the terms and conditions of the Nabalco lease in 1968 and the later exemption of the Nabalco leases from many of the provision of the Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act 1976 produced many concerns among Yolngu people.

Figure 1
Proposed structure of Napranum Aboriginal Corporation



Again, contrasting views of the process, and the place, constructed by those on the opposite 'sides' of the frontier provided foundations for very different interpretations of the outcome and the present situation. For Nabalco, Gove was a remote, difficult and costly location for development. For Yolngu, the area was part of their "sacred endowment".

One result of the contrast between Yolngu and Nabalco perceptions of the local area - and its resources - is a sharp divide over their approaches to the 1968 Gove Agreement. On the one hand, Nabalco insists that cannot be changed without their agreement - and they will not agree to revisit such a recent and hard-fought negotiation. On the other hand, Yolngu groups, particularly the Gumatj owners of the main areas af-

ected by Nabalco's mining and processing operations, resent their exclusion from the original negotiations, and resent the exemptions granted to Nabalco in relation to the Land Rights Act.

They have tried to secure a political lever to reopen the original agreement. Expansion of waste disposal onto land outside the original lease areas has been seen as one such lever, as the refinery will eventually run out of disposal sites. Discussions in 1991 and 1992 of adjustment of Nabalco's royalty payments to the NT Government were also seen as an opportunity to push for re-negotiation, this time including the Yolngu traditional owners - a result strenuously and successfully opposed by Nabalco at the time.

The 1960s failure to adequately acknowledge Yolngu people's concerns

about the impacts of decisions made about resources on their lands has left a legacy of a fragile and divided community which faces a number of still unresolved questions about the relationship between Aboriginal interests, the mining industry and the national interest in the region's resource and its development trajectory. The Gove Land Rights Case, with Justice Blackburn's now discredited *terra nullius* ruling, remains a potent force in the history and geography of this region, and in the wider relationship between Aborigines and mining – despite many positive advances in relationships between Yolngu groups and Nabalco on a wide range of specific activities.

WA's Eastern Goldfields

Gold's unique position in the international financial system, gives the industry a profile which is often hard for outsiders to really understand. The gold frontier in colonial Australia extended into almost every corner of the continent in an extraordinary exploration effort. Most of the nation's major goldfields were discovered before the First World War – and in many places, it was gold mining that brought the first substantial occupation of Aboriginal estates. The exciting prospect of windfall profits from remote gold finds has long been one of the key mining myths in the Australian legend.

Like the examples from the bauxite industry already discussed, gold mining has shaped the wider relationship between mining and Aborigines across history.

In WA's Eastern Goldfields, the frontier arrived in the 1890s and stayed for the next one hundred years. The society which invaded the region was neither civilized nor representative of metropolitan colonial society. Despite the contribution of Aboriginal knowledge and labour to the industry, Aboriginal people were rapidly pushed to the fringes of Goldfields society.

By the 1960s, Aboriginal involvement in the regional economy was substantial, but extremely constrained by exclusion from education, harsh provisions of industrial legislation, and what now appear to be extreme and inhuman controls on every aspect of Aboriginal people's lives under oppressive and racist legislation.

Aboriginal groups were required to adjust to and accommodate not only a hostile non-Aboriginal presence in their traditional homelands, and the booms and busts of the region's dominant industry. They also had to deal with the social effects of dispossession, displacement and competition for the land and its resources.

Gold's effects on local Aboriginal people, however, cannot be simply separated from the effects of other changing circumstances, including changes to government policies and programs and the internal dynamics of Aboriginal groups. What can be clearly seen in the Goldfields, however, is the role played by strong mining industry lobbies which seek to elevate the status of mining companies. These lobby groups receive extraordinarily high levels of political support in Western Australia – even though virtually no royalties are levied on gold production by the state, and profits from gold mining were subject to company tax only in the last few years.

Had the native title holders of this region's active mining areas had access to benefits comparable to those generated by the Land Rights Act in the Northern Territory, in the period 1970–1989 they would have received discretionary funds in excess of 70 MAUD. This would have provided a substantial Aboriginal-owned capital base, a much stronger foundation for the regional economy, and a very different basis for Aboriginal participation in regional futures.

While there are some success stories, such as Kalgoorlie Consolidated Gold Mines' training program, the local experience is probably much better represented by the story of an Aboriginal man

who sought support for a small scale contracting business servicing mining and pastoral businesses. He needed a loan of 70 000 AUD to buy equipment, which he knew he could maintain and would enable him to meet contracts he'd been promised by operators. Unfortunately, he didn't meet ATSI's strict guidelines for funding, but was offered over 2 MAUD to set up a regional training program that he felt completely ill-equipped to take on. In the end, he decided to give up trying and go on the dole. If we can learn any lessons from such stories, it is perhaps that well-targetted research can provide a basis for better understanding local Aboriginal experience of marginalization and alienation. But, transforming such knowledge into practical strategies to empower the people who have been the victims of marginalization is both urgent and exceptionally difficult.

In the Tanami Region of the Northern Territory, the Warlpiri experience of mining is unique in Australia. The area's remote gold fields were discovered in the early 1900s, and occupied sporadically up until the 1950s, then abandoned until renewed exploration interest in the 1970s, a period in which the area's traditional Warlpiri custodians obtained title to vast tracts of the region, under the terms of the Land Rights Act. This meant that the traditional owners were able to negotiate the terms and conditions governing most of the development activity in the region.

North Flinders Mines has also had a unique experience in dealing with Aboriginal interests in developing its new mines in the area. Since the early 1980s, the company has been through a series of negotiations and exploration programs – all of which were relatively successful.

North Flinders acquired its original exploration licences around the old Granites mining area in the early 1970s, just before the passage of the Land Rights Act. While the company has lobbied for amendments to the Act, North Flinders

has negotiated access to vast areas of Warlpiri land since 1982.

Within eleven months of concluding its first negotiations, North Flinders confirmed the existence of a commercially viable gold deposit at the Granites. Since then, they have identified two further major deposits, with total reserves in excess of 1 million ounces of gold.

Through their dealings with North Flinders and other mining companies, the Warlpiri and the Central Land Council have become skilled and successful negotiators. Their experience and success has fuelled Warlpiri expectations that each subsequent negotiation should produce improved outcomes for traditional owners – as well as confirmation of Warlpiri views of the great value of their land.

North Flinders' success also gave rise to concerns within the mining industry because it provides an extremely persuasive demonstration of the efficacy of the mining provisions of the Land Rights Act.

Given the investment that industry lobbyists have put into criticising the Act, some apparently see successful exploration following successful negotiations as unfortunate. According to a Western Mining executive put it, the problem is that:

*The NFM experience in negotiating an agreement and then having immediate exploration success has probably heightened the expectations of the aboriginal (sic) in the area. Future negotiations will always be influenced by the NFM example and their continuing success.*⁷

While it is clear that neither successful negotiation nor exploration success will by itself resolve all the problems facing Warlpiri people, it is also clear that the Land Rights Act has delivered to them much greater control over their futures, much stronger foundations for playing a strong role in regional development, and a framework for maintaining a continuing and constructive relationship with the mining industry. This is not solely be-

cause they receive mining royalty equivalents, but this has certainly meant that their relationship with miners interested in their lands has been much more equal and, from their perspective at least, more productive, than it would otherwise have been. Reflecting on his life in the mining industry, former North Flinders chief executive Geoff Stewart suggested that despite his view of the inadequacies of arrangements under the Land Rights Act, his company and the Warlpiri were able to form "beneficial bonds" with each other:

Sadly – within some segments of the mining industry – there appears to be little understanding of the interests of Aboriginal people and there are too few people willing to make an effort to find out what the Aboriginal interests in the land really are....

*From my experience, it is obvious that Australian mining companies should have done a lot more ground work with Aboriginal people during the 1940s, 50s and 60s. It would have made things much easier for them now. But then, that was in the days when Aboriginal land rights were not enshrined in legalistic forms. In those days, essentially the opinions of the traditional Aboriginal land owners on the effect of mining on their land were neither sought nor wanted by most.*⁸

Conclusion

Stewart's words, spoken well before the Mabo decision, have a ring of prophecy. The current generation of Aboriginal leaders, mining industry figures and government representatives face a difficult and complex legacy of years of neglect, hostility and disrespect. This makes miscues and misunderstandings very easy, and the common ground very elusive.

It is not only Aboriginal groups who construct their social, cultural and political identity in relation to particular tracts of land and the resources they contain. Major mining companies have also con-

structed their economic and political identities with these materials.

The mining industry has been lobbying for a response to the Mabo decision which would limit the value of native title to the point of meaninglessness. Ironically, many of the same mining companies have sought to insulate themselves from any reevaluation of the particular relationships which they have constructed between land, resources and their identity.

Experience in bauxite and gold mining provides material for both optimistic and pessimistic scenarios in the wake of recognition of native title. Both industries provide examples of mutual recognition and accommodation and the development of strong local working relationships between mining companies and Aboriginal communities, as well as bleaker stories of inter-cultural conflict and lack of respect.

Although legislation can provide a necessary framework for local scale relationships between resource projects and indigenous people, it cannot create good faith and trust between traditional owners of resource rich country and miners. This outcome requires greatly improved cross-cultural communication on both sides, and a substantial shift in the culture of most mining companies.

In an era where many companies pride themselves on improved service to their 'customers', it is imperative that they increasingly include their host communities – including the indigenous owners of the localities in which they operate – as among their most important customers. Unless cross-cultural literacy is incorporated into the core management skills of corporate culture in the major resource corporations, we can expect to see many more companies experience catastrophic cultural miscues and 'showstoppers'.

Recognition of native title will force many mining companies to finally recognize that Aboriginal traditional owners have standing in the land management systems of Australia. Indigenous Aus-

traliains clearly have a legitimate and continuing interest in what happens to their country, and the resources it contains.

The Native Title Act does not challenge national sovereignty or Crown ownership of minerals, but it does serve to remind us that minerals are a national resource from which both the nation as a whole, and the local citizens most affected can reasonably expect to benefit. Under the pre-Mabo arrangements, there was absolutely no guarantee any benefits at all would flow to traditional Aboriginal owners and affected communities. While there is no certainty that the new arrangements can guarantee benefits will begin to flow, it is demonstrably the case that, at least from the other side of the frontier from that which is best represented in Australian power structures, things now at least have a chance of getting better.

At Weipa, Aboriginal people have consistently spoken to me about the need for Comalco to demonstrate their recognition of and respect for the mine's traditional Aboriginal owners. From their perspective this is more about social recognition than a legal claim on profits. The cultural shift involved in Comalco giving such recognition is very great, but not, I believe, unthinkable. In the Tanami, North Flinders have taken many of the steps involved in just such a shift – with no threat to profits and production.

The challenge then, to both sides of the resources frontier, is to better understand the history of those frontiers, and the new regional geography of mining which will develop 'post-Mabo'. Inevitably, it will be very different to the industry's 'pre-Mabo' geography, because it will have to treat indigenous interests far more seriously than ever before. And it is also inevitable that the community and company players will find themselves challenged and changed by the new economic and cultural landscapes in which they find themselves.

Notes

This is an edited version of a paper presented to "Mabo and Native Titles Seminar", co-sponsored by Macquarie University Mineral & Energy Economics Centre and Australian Mining and Petroleum Law Association in Sydney, April 14–15, 1994. Copies of the full paper are available on request from the author. The author would like to acknowledge the research assistance of Ian Bryson and Sandra Suchet, and the co-operation of Comalco Ltd, Nabalco Ltd, Central Land Council, Northern Land Council, North Flinders Mining Ltd, Kalgoorle Consolidated Gold Mines and Napranum Aboriginal Corporation, as well as the Australian Research Council (QEII Fellowship Scheme) and the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody for their support in research used in this paper.

¹ 1992, *Mabo and others v State of Queensland*, 107 ALR 1: 1-170; Richard Bartlett, 1993, *The Mabo Decision*, Butterworths, Sydney provides the full text of the High Court judgement, plus a useful commentary by Bartlett and an index to the decision. In December 1993, the Commonwealth passed legislation to recognize and systematize claims processes for native title in Australia (*Native Title Act 1993*).

² Previously published sources drawn on here are: Howitt, R., 1990, "All They Get Is The Dust": *Aborigines, Mining and Regional Restructuring in Western Australia's Eastern Goldfields*, ERRRU Working Paper No 1, Economic and Regional Restructuring Research Unit, University of Sydney (revised edition, 1991); Howitt, R., G. Crough and B. Pritchard, 1990, *Participation, Power and Social Research in Central Australia*, *Australian Aboriginal Studies*, 1990/1: 2–10; Howitt, R., 1991, *Gold Mining and Aborigines in Central Australia*, in *Mining and Indigenous People in Australasia*, pages 119–137; Howitt, R., 1992a, *Aborigines, Mining and Regional Restructuring in Northeast Arnhem Land*, ERRRU Working Paper No 10, Economic and Regional Restructuring Research Unit, University of Sydney; Howitt, R., 1992b, *The Politics of Locality Studies: a remote antipodean viewpoint*, *Area*, 24.1: 73–81; Howitt, R., 1992c, *Weipa: industrialisation and indigenous rights in a remote Australian mining area*, *Geography*, 77.3: 223–235; Howitt, R., 1993a, *Social impact assessment as "applied*

peoples' geography", *Australian Geographical Studies*, 31.2: 127–140; Howitt, R., 1993b, *Manufacturing and technological change: issues from the aluminium industry*, *Geography Bulletin*, 25.2: 67–75; Gagnon, C, Hirsch, P and Howitt, R., 1993, *Can SIA empower local communities?* *Environmental Impact Assessment Review*, 13: 229–253; and Howitt, R., ed, 1993c, *Marginalisation in Theory and Practice*, ERRRU Working Paper No 12, Economic and Regional Restructuring Research Unit, University of Sydney.

³ Extract from the poem "My Bleeding Country", by Joyce Hall (used with permission of the poet).

⁴ *Milirrpum v Nabalco*, 17 FLR 141 (1971).

⁵ *Australian Financial Review*, 14 March 1994: page 11 (Wik claim will not affect Gladstone).

⁶ See also Nancy Williams, 1986, *The Yolngu and their land: a system of land tenure and the fights for its recognition*, Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, Canberra, and Edgar Wells, 1982, *Reward and Punishment in Arnhem Land 1962–1963*, Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, Canberra

⁷ Quoted in Howitt, 1991, *Aborigines and gold mining in Central Australia*, in Connell & Howitt, page 124.

⁸ Geoff Stewart, 1991, *Australian miners pay the price for ignoring Aboriginal needs*, *Australian Journal of Mining*, 6.61: page 24. ■