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MTP Contracting: running a remote NRM business on the Barkly Tablelands

Joy and Maxie Priest

MTP Contracting, Corella Creek, via Tennant Creek PMB 24, NT. 0860. E: joypriestis@hotmail.com, Ph: 08 8964 4789

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Abstract

MTP Contracting is an Indigenous business operating out of Corella Creek Community in the Barkly Tablelands, NT. Established originally as a contract mustering business, MTP has expanded into NRM as a weed spraying business providing a targeted, on-ground effort in the battle to manage Parkinsonia and other woody weeds on the Barkly, and was also recently involved in a drought refuge survey of ephemeral waterholes in the area. This presentation will provide an overview of why MTP Contracting was established by founders and directors Joy and Maxie Priest and will talk about the challenges faced in developing livelihoods in NRM on this remote community, the projects completed and the hopes for the future. MTP has established strong relationships with the pastoral industry, in particular Australian Agricultural Company, Barkly Landcare and Territory Natural Resource Management, and has become an influential organisation in the Barkly and beyond.

The MTP Contracting story

Maxie Priest, with the support of his wife Joy Priest, established a contracting business that offered services to the pastoral industry back in 2009. With encouragement from the Australian Agricultural Company (AACo) Maxie, trading as MTP Contracting, commenced with four services expanding as clients required. The initial services offered were cattle mustering, rural fencing, bore repairs and weed management on cattle pastoral properties. In addition to providing these services Maxie Priest developed a pool of locally based Indigenous men to become skilled stockmen with an aim of having many progress to gain employment with local pastoral properties. The North Australian Rural Management Consultants (NARMCo) were instrumental in assisting in the establishment of MTP and have continued to provide assistance and guidance as MTP has grown.

MTP Contracting is based at Corella Creek Community, via Tennant Creek in the Northern Territory. Maxie and Joy Priest's personal residence at Corella Creek is the head office for the business. Corella Creek Community is located on the Tableland Highway, 180km north of the Barkly Homestead and some 385kms north-east of Tennant Creek. It is entirely encompassed by Brunette Downs Station, an AACO property. Nearby is Corella Lake, one of the significant sites in the region important for conservation of water birds and wetland plant communities. The Corella Lake System is situated on the Mitchell Grass plains of the Barkly Tableland, in the eastern part of a suite of terminal drainage basins extending from Lake Woods to Lake Sylvester.

Following the success of the pastoral contracts, MTP Contracting identified that there were no existing weed spraying operatives in the Barkly region. Consequently, they have since expanded into natural resource management as a weed spraying business providing a targeted, on-ground effort in the battle to manage Parkinsonia and other woody weeds on the Barkly, in addition to their cattle work. The first NRM contract was for treatment of Parkinsonia on the headwaters of the Corella Creek catchment in 2012 within Brunette Downs. Since then, additional contracts have been awarded for control of the prickly bushes Parkinsonia, Prickly Acacia and Mesquite across Avon Downs, Austral Downs, Lake Nash, Anthony Lagoon, Kurundi and Beetaloo stations, all on the Barkly or within the greater Barkly Shire region. These have been either in association with Barkly Landcare and Conservation Association (BLCA) or through direct funding from Territory Natural Resource Management (TNRM). This work has provided a valuable insight to the extent of the weed control required allowing MTP to provide guidance to landholders as to how best to manage control of

prickle bushes and also allowed their own staff a greater understanding of country. MTP have identified Rubber Bush as an emerging threat to the region and hope to be able to utilise their services as management plans continue apace for control of this weed.

In August 2014 MTP were involved in a drought refuge survey of ephemeral waterholes in the area. In partnership with NT Government's Department of Land Resources Management, TNRM, BLCA and Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory, MTP staff assisted in identifying fish populations across targeted waterholes through a catch, measure and release methodology. This work provided many of the first formally recorded species in the area and due to the local knowledge of MTP was able to provide historical context to the variability of the lake system and identifying potential drought refuges for many of the identified species. Furthermore, by continuing to expand the nature of their business activities, MTP have been able to employ a larger number of the community. What began as a largely male dominated culture through the mustering work has now seen many of the women of the community employed casually depending on the nature of the work in addition to Joy who, in her role as co-director, performs all of the administrative duties on behalf of MTP. The business is now of sufficient size to be able to run both mustering and weed control simultaneously allowing for more contracts to be undertaken.

The business model builds on strong relationships with regional stakeholders, knowledge of country, and an unwavering commitment to reside on the Barkly alongside the 5% of the population who call the Australian outback home. The business is now in its fourth year and has employed over twenty staff during that time, providing formal and informal training to ensure skills are maintained and enhanced. As a result, MTP Contracting has established strong relationships with the pastoral industry, in particular Australian Agricultural Company, Barkly Landcare and Conservation Association and Territory Natural Resource Management, and has become an influential organisation in the Barkly and beyond. Furthermore, beyond delivering NRM outcomes MTP have demonstrated that possibilities for livelihoods exist within remote communities. Following on from MTP's success a similar business, Triple P Contracting, was established in Elliott in late 2014 on the western edge of the Barkly Tablelands. Triple P's first contract ran in parallel to an MTP contract allowing MTP staff to share their knowledge and expertise with the region's second Indigenous NRM business.

Maxie and Joy Priest are very committed to making their business a success and have proven they are applying themselves diligently to working hard in the industry. Both are taking extra steps to educate themselves on business management matters. Maxie and Joy Priest have a realistic outlook on the business's prospects for success and understand they will have to continue to develop their business management knowledge and expertise to achieve this success.