

## REPORTS

# Kiwirrkurra: the flood in the desert



### Introduction

Many remote Indigenous communities in Australia are located in areas most at risk of 'natural' disasters. One such remote Western Desert community, Kiwirrkurra, was devastated by a flood in March 2001. A project recently completed by Emergency Management Australia, in consultation with the Fire and Emergency Services Authority of WA, (FESA) has documented the communities stories from the Kiwirrkurra flood to identify the lessons learned, so that other communities and emergency managers can benefit.

A brief history of the settlement of Kiwirrkurra and its current administrative arrangements is included as background, as well as some information on the devastating flood and the key lessons learned by both the community and emergency managers. It is hoped that these lessons can inform future emergency management work with remote Indigenous communities, and help identify ways for Indigenous communities and emergency managers to work together better.

The Kiwirrkurra stories demonstrate that through developing and maintaining good and trusted relationships, good communication channels and understanding and respecting relationships, culture and country even the most severe of emergencies can be managed and the community can survive.

### Kiwirrkurra – the most remote community in Australia.

Kiwirrkurra in Western Australia is one of Australia's most remote Indigenous communities. It is located approximately 1200km to the east of Port Hedland in Western Australia and 850km to the west of Alice Springs in the Northern Territory. The Kiwirrkurra permanent community was established in the early 1980s, as one of the 'Pintupi Homelands' outstations. By 1983 there were community residents living permanently around the bore, and in close proximity to their country. Members of the Kiwirrkurra people were among some of the last Indigenous groups to come into contact with non-Aboriginal Australia.

Although Kiwirrkurra falls within the boundaries of the East Pilbara Shire (administered from Newman in WA), the community has closer ties with, and is geographically closer to Alice Springs. Despite Kiwirrkurra lying officially beyond the area of the Ngaanyatjarra communities, the Ngaanyatjarra Council is active in supporting the Kiwirrkurra community, through the provision of services such as legal and anthropological advice, administrative support, commercial air transport and health services. The 'tyranny of distance' has meant that they are not necessarily supported to the same level as other communities.

### What happened at Kiwirrkurra?

Flooding occurred in the Kiwirrkurra region in early 2000, cutting off road access to the community for a number of months and resulting in discussions regarding mitigation works and other possible solutions. Funding was provided for mitigation works following the 2000 floods. Flooding occurred the following year, however, before any mitigation strategies or broader solutions had been implemented.

Between March 3 and 5 2001 unusually heavy rainfall across the desert caused widespread flooding. The Kiwirrkurra area was one of the areas most seriously affected by the flooding which resulted from run-off being trapped in the low-lying basins with little or no drainage. The flooding was compounded by the unusually high watertable levels in the area which were the result of high rainfall the previous year - the ground

was simply soaked. Towards the end of March 2001, shortly after contractors had begun to clean up the houses in Kiwirrkurra and grade the surrounding roads, another large rain event occurred. The water levels in the community rose again and the physical recovery works were unable to continue. For the Kiwirrkurra people there were significant cultural issues bound up with the cause of the extensive rainfall and the resulting flood, most of which were not able to be discussed with outsiders to the community.

In response to the March flooding, the entire Kiwirrkurra community (170 people) was evacuated to Kintore (although for various reasons the community didn't stay). From Kintore the community relocated to the Norforce Army Base at Alice Springs. The evacuation was carried out with the assistance of Defence Force helicopters, and was coordinated by Emergency Management Australia (EMA). The Norforce Army Base was only available for a period of 4 weeks and in this time an alternative site had to be found. After a range of options had been considered, it was decided to relocate the community temporarily at Morapoi Station in the Western Australian Goldfields, some 2000 km SSW of Kiwirrkurra, probably for about 12 months.

The time the Kiwirrkurra community spent in Morapoi, though short, is generally regarded as having resulted in a severe disruption to the social fabric of the community. Kiwirrkurra is normally a dry (alcohol free) community, but during their time at Morapoi and Alice Springs the community had access to alcohol. Many people reported problems such as drunken, violent and aggressive behaviour and domestic violence during the stay at Morapoi. Some community members commented that the community's separation from their country contributed to the social difficulties the community experienced. After a short time the community decided to leave Morapoi and began to move themselves closer to their homelands, staying in other communities and settlements where they could. It was nearly 18 months before the community was able to get back to their homes. Almost all residents had returned to Kiwirrkurra by late 2002.



Moya Newman (FESA) walking and talking with some of the Kiwirrkurra women elders.



FESA's Peter Cameron with Kiwirrkurra Elders.

## Working with Indigenous communities – Lessons Learned

Every remote Indigenous community is different, and no one model of effective communication, emergency management or capacity building will work in every community. Within some general guidelines, emergency management and emergency services workers must build their own relationships with communities, and come to know, understand and respect the background and culture of community members. Only then can they focus together on how best to communicate, make decisions and build a self reliant community that knows initially what to do, and then who to call, in the event disaster strikes. Training and development opportunities (capacity building) for the community are in fact two way learning experiences for all involved.

### **Building trusted relationships enables two way communication and understanding**

In Kiwirrkurra and other Western Australian remote communities one way in which relationships have been established and strengthened is through a program of pre wet season visits, with FESA personnel providing advice on risk management and mitigation strategies. By working with communities (in advance of the most likely period for a natural disaster to occur) trusted relationships are built, and understanding is developed on both sides. The importance of having appropriate emergency services personnel working with these communities is obvious when one considers the operational value of on the ground knowledge in the management of an incident. The importance of the trusted relationship is even more integral to an effective incident management response when swift and efficient decision making is enabled through quick and effective consultation between trusted emergency managers and the community. Community members in Kiwirrkurra have indicated that it important for them to stay in their own remote community, where their families are, and where they can maintain their links with the land e.g. go out hunting etc. They have developed a relationship with Peter, and feel they can give him a call should they need to move out of the community again.

***Good, established communication channels and working within community decision making structures is vital***

Since the flood in Kiwirrkurra good relationships have been established between senior Kiwirrkurra men and women and FESA staff such as Peter Cameron, District Manager Pilbara West, and Moya Newman, Manager of the FESA Indigenous Policy & Strategy Branch. Both are welcomed into the community. They are respected for the work they have done and the emergency plans and strategies they have put in place together with the community. Utilising their understanding of the structure of the community, the decision-making arrangements, and most importantly, who they needed to be speaking with, these emergency management staff have been able to establish two way lines of communication and understanding. Community members, likewise, know who to call and how to reach them. Having both men and women working with the community means that knowledge and understanding have developed with regard to both men's and women's business and decision making structures.



*Kiwirrkurra community still flooded two weeks after peak.*

***Understanding and respecting country and culture can improve outcomes and recovery***

It is important that emergency managers working with Indigenous communities understand the historical and current context of the community they are working with. This knowledge makes it easier to negotiate and communicate with community members. Additionally it can help avoid awkward misunderstandings and embarrassing trip ups over cultural and/or historical sensitivities and issues that may damage trusted relationships. After the Kiwirrkurra evacuation community members spoke of the difficulties associated with leaving their dogs behind. These animals were (and remain) an important cultural element of the community and it was devastating to leave them. There can also be broader cultural spiritual and custodial considerations in relation to events such as flooding, and it is important that emergency managers

make themselves aware of these, if the community is able to share such information. It's also important that emergency management arrangements and procedures are flexible enough to accommodate the cultural and spiritual needs of the people.

***Education and training offers benefits to community members and emergency managers.***

Education and training in emergency planning, risk management and mitigation strategies and incident response are invaluable for both emergency management staff and community members. Education and training helps build community resilience and self reliance, improves emergency management planning and pre disaster preparations, and can aid effective incident response and community recovery. There can also be spin off benefits such as improved literacy and numeracy skills, better attendances at school and/or training and increased levels of community and individual self esteem. Ongoing cultural awareness and community engagement training for emergency management staff is beneficial in giving them the tools to work more effectively with, and make the most of, their interactions with Indigenous communities.

***Self reliance, preparation and planning are important for communities, especially those remote and distant from emergency services***

Current and past chairmen of the Kiwirrkurra community expressed their desire for continuing education, training and engagement with emergency management and services staff, to help them build a strong, healthy and vibrant community living in the bush, working together. Where communities, like Kiwirrkurra, are hundreds of kilometres away from the most basic of emergency services, they must be self reliant for as long it is likely to take to get emergency services there. First aid courses, community fire trailers, emergency kits with food, water and batteries etc can help communities ride out the initial stages of a disaster until help arrives.



*Flooded Kiwirrkurra residences three weeks after the flood peak.*



FESA's Peter Cameron discussing flood mitigation works with a community member.

### **Emergency managers and emergency service workers need to work with communities in the recovery process**

The involvement of community members in the physical recovery of Kiwirrkurra was problematic given the physical distance between Morapoi, where the community was relocated to, and Kiwirrkurra. In the event of another disaster in the community, consideration may be given to involving community members in the clean up process, including decision-making around renovation and refurbishment of housing. In discussions with Kiwirrkurra community members about their return home, many indicated that finding their personal belongings gone and their houses refitted with new furniture and whitegoods was profoundly disturbing. The involvement of community members in decision-making of this kind is likely to facilitate better community and individual recovery from such traumatic incidents.



Education and training session with the community.

## **Conclusion**

The telling of stories is important to Indigenous people. Their stories have survived over generations, passed down from the elders to the children. People are connected to their own stories, which are a source of pride. One community's story can also be used to help others. The Kiwirrkurra community's flood and evacuation experience taught them much about managing in a time of adversity that tested them as families, individuals and a community. The stories coming from the Kiwirrkurra community and the emergency managers who worked with them contain lessons for us all. Using the most ancient of communication methods (story telling) and modern methods (the Internet and video pod casting), we are able to share the lessons across a vast range of audiences in different places and in different ways. A documentary about the flood and evacuation of Kiwirrkurra ('Worrying for Kiwirrkurra' has been filmed and is due for release in April this year, while more information about Kiwirrkurra and the flood that forever changed the community can be found on the EMA website [www.ema.gov.au](http://www.ema.gov.au).

This article is based in part on research work done in 2004 by Ms Heidi Ellemor, formerly of EMA, and follow up research and interviews undertaken by the Kiwirrkurra Documentary Project Team.

## **Lessons Learned**

- Building trusted relationships enables two way communication and understanding
- Good, established communication channels and working within community decision making structures is vital
- Understanding and respecting country and culture will improve outcomes and recovery
- Education and training offers benefits to community members and emergency managers in terms of building resilience, improving planning and preparations, assisting recovery and community development and capacity building
- Self reliance, preparation and planning are important for communities, especially those remote and distant from emergency services
- Emergency managers and emergency service worker need to work with communities in the recovery process.