

# Traditional Owners want answers over trashed opal mecca

## WHY HAS MINTABIE BEEN LEFT TO ROT?

**BILEY WALTER**

TRADITIONAL OWNERS of the Outback opal mining town Mintabie say they are "frustrated" and "angry" at the lack of progress made with the town since its government-ordered closure nearly three years ago.

The town, about 100km from Adelaide on the outskirts of the Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara (APY) Lands, was closed in January 2020 on the back of a damning government-commissioned report that cited heroin use and other issues, and identified Mintabie as a supply point for drugs and alcohol into the lands.

The Mintabie Review Panel, which handed down its report to the Labor government in 2018, recommended the town be immediately closed and handed back to Traditional Owners so the land could be regenerated after four decades of damage.

The town's residents launched Federal Court legal action, citing discrimination, and were granted an extension until the beginning of 2020, but still forced to leave.

Now, the Traditional Owners, Anangu, who supported the town's closure, say they have been left "in the dark" since the decision was made. "Our frustration is the clean-up and the nothing happening out there when government made the decision to do what they were going to do which was close the township," Karina Lester, a Traditional Owner at Wallatina on and off for 30 years after her activist father Yami Lester, who was blinded by British nuclear testing at Emu Field as a boy, took over the station's lease in the 1960s.

"We want the clean-up to be done and something where Anangu can feel that they can contribute to see that community rehabilitating or that Country or that place that has cultural significance to us slowly get back to healing and back to itself," she said. "But currently, the way that it is now, Anangu don't want it given back to us."

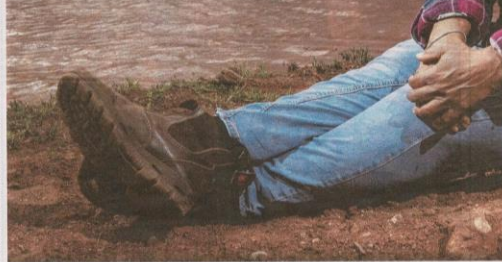
Ms Lester sat on the Mintabie Review Panel and supported its recommendation to close the town, a decision the stands by now, but said government talks with Traditional Owners stopped once the town was closed.

"People from Indulkana and Mimili... they were all pretty not clear about what the process... and then all of a sudden the government made that decision and things were sort of all happening then out of their control," she said.

"We're sort of waiting on what government's doing or thinking or what they're going to do."

"It kind of got out of our hands".

Ms Lester said closing the



town had not stemmed the flow of drugs and alcohol into the APY Lands despite the spread of illicit substances into vulnerable communities being a key motivation of the review panel's decision.

Mark Campbell, a Traditional Owner who was the deputy chairman of a sub-committee tasked with managing Mintabie's transition back to APY ownership, told The Advertiser closing the town was a mistake.

"I thought I was saying it for a good cause and every-

thing but then growing up and learning a few things along the way and I realised it was not a good thing in the first place," he said.

He said 80 per cent of Anangu people he spoke to at the time wanted the town to remain open.

"Mintabie was part of our history," he said. "There was a better way to go about it. I am disappointed and angry about the fact that it's taking this long to get the clean-up going."

Mr Campbell also said the

closure hadn't stopped drugs and alcohol making it into the lands. "That was my biggest concern for agreeing to the clean-down - the drugs and alcohol coming in because it affected me so much and other young people," he said.

"But we will not move forward because that's still coming in."

Mr Campbell said he wanted the town to be reopened by the state government after sitting derelict for almost three years.

Despite his concerns, Indigenous Affairs Minister Ryan Maher said closing Mintabie was "absolutely" the right decision and handling the land back and beginning the clean-up was "on the radar".

"That is certainly something we're looking at now that we're back in government," he said.

"Looking at how proper handback is affected and what it means for remediation of what's left there."

APY general manager Richard King said the clean-



Traditional Owners Karina Lester, on her station, waits answers on the future of Mintabie. Inset: Karina and Luka Sumanovic in Adelaide - top; from the Mintabie homes they love and their home town. Pictures: Simon Cross and Tom Henbury

up at Mintabie was being managed by the Energy and Mining Department and that a scope of works had been agreed upon between the parties, with issuing tenders for the work the next step in the process.

Mr King said APY was "working towards maintaining Anangu employment rates" and looked forward to working with the department and state government to "progress remediation of Mintabie".

Former Mintabie residents

were also frustrated at the lack of action since the town's closure and watching their former home be destroyed.

Luka Sumanovic lived in Mintabie for about 40 years after fleeing the communist regime in Croatia before being forced away from the new life he had built.

Mr Sumanovic, the long-time politician of the Mintabie Hotel who built his pub with his bare hands in the 1980s, was one of the longest-standing residents in the town.

"I'm going to miss Mintabie forever."

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