

'Justice is delivered': Yarralin handed back to traditional owners after 40-year battle

Northern Territory Aboriginal community given back more than 50,000 hectares of land after decades-long fight for land rights



Women perform a traditional dance at the handover ceremony of title deeds to 50,000 hectares of Aboriginal land to its traditional owners at Yarralin, Northern Territory. Photograph: Helen Davidson for the Guardian



[Helen Davidson](#) in Yarralin

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In a dusty corner of the [Northern Territory](#), in a place forgotten by road graders, housing departments and mobile and internet service providers, a few hundred people gathered in the Yarralin sports hall on Tuesday to receive back that which they had always owned.

The region's sparse landscape is full of dramatic tableland shelves, glistening billabongs and rivers. Yarralin, a demographically young community of between 260 and 400, sits a few hours' drive from Katherine on a dirt road often impassable during the wet season.

On this dry, hot morning dozens of school children jostled for plastic chairs. People wandered in from the community on the other side of a low fence and the young helped the old to their places front of stage.

Fly-in politicians and journalists talked largely among themselves and others they recognised, and candidates for the upcoming federal election sought out community leaders.

After a welcome to country and a dance and song by local women and children, the Indigenous affairs minister, Nigel Scullion, made a speech he has made before but one he enjoys repeating.

"It's great to be here with the traditional owners to recognise this as Aboriginal land," he said. "But we are recognising what we already knew was the case. This land has been

Aboriginal land well before today's grant, well before you even put in the claim for the grant."

More speeches followed, senior community members spoke of the 40-year battle for their land. Others stood to question the fairness of the process.

Then the minister officially handed over the title deeds for the 50,310-hectare Wickham River land claim comprising three blocks of land to traditional owners under the Ngalkarrang-Wulngann Aboriginal Land Trust. The deputy mayor of the community of Yarralin, Brian Pedwell, wiped a tear from his eye.



The Indigenous affairs minister, Nigel Scullion, hands over the title deeds to 50,000 hectares of Aboriginal land near Yarralin to its traditional owners. Photograph: Helen Davidson for the Guardian

The claim for the land around Yarralin was fiercely fought over for far longer that it appears on paper.

Protests began in the 1960s and 70s but government policy and a series of bureaucratic confusions and financial setbacks meant an official claim over the full block of land was not lodged until 1983. It took another 16 years to be heard by the commissioner.

Marie Campbell, one of the traditional owners along with her brother, told Guardian Australia Tuesday was a long time coming. Many of her family had not lived to see the day.

"Dad got this land first and we didn't even know it was taken away," she said. "They just took it, just like that. I said, what?"

Campbell said they started the fight all over again, eventually winning it back. "Bit by bit, you know."

The handover coincides with the 40th anniversary of the Northern Territory Aboriginal Land Rights Act. A sizeable portion of the crowd wore commemorative shirts emblazoned with "An act of social justice".

"Today a measure of justice is being delivered back to the traditional owners of this country, to provide a future for those wonderful young children we heard before," said the Labor MP Warren Snowdon. "This land is a particularly strong title, which means Aboriginal rights in this country can never be taken away."

They have been taken before. [The history of Yarralin](#) is a bloody one, full of stories of beatings and kidnappings and murders at the hands of white pastoralists and police.

The Victoria River Downs station, first established in 1880, employed a large number of Indigenous people as stockmen and station hands for little or no pay. Many of them would join the Gurindji at Wattie Creek after walking off the Victoria River Downs and [Wave Hill stations](#) for the 1966 protests.



Elvis and Mina join in the celebrations on Tuesday at the official handover of the title deeds to the land around Yarallin to traditional owners. Photograph: Helen Davidson for the Guardian

In 1975, Patrick McConvell, a linguist who was called before a Yarralin land claim hearing over an area about half the size of that granted on Tuesday, noted the inarguable hold of the traditional owners and their justifiable wish for recompense.

“The land belongs to this group of Aboriginal people by Aboriginal law and because they have occupied it since time immemorial,” said McConvell.

“It was taken away from them by white pastoralists by force, without permission and without any payment to them, and should therefore be returned to them, at least in part.”

Chairman of the Northern Land Council, Samuel Bush-Blanasi told the crowd: “It’s good to look back on all that history and remind ourselves how far we’ve come in a relatively short time. Much still has to be achieved for us to gain real equality, but getting our land back puts us all, black and white, in a better place.”

Pedwell, the deputy mayor, said his family had been involved since day one, but he felt it had come to a head since the Northern Territory intervention came in and some organisations lost track of ownership and finances.

“It’s special for all of us, not just my family but all the community,” he said.

The granting of several claims in one was “reassuring” and went some way to easing tensions – although not all, he conceded.

Some families had been unsuccessful in their claims.

Anthropologist Deborah Rose, who has assisted the people of Yarralin since the 1980s, publicly asked the Northern Land Council to look into the “luck of the draw” which had

disappointed the people of nearby Lingara, who she said received an “insulting” small land handback. “They were crushed,” she said.



Marie Campbell, a traditional owner of the land in the Wickham River land claim, stands with Deborah Rose, an anthropologist who has assisted the people of Yarralin since the 1980s.

Photograph: Helen Davidson for the Guardian

Bush-Blanasi told Guardian Australia it was the first he’d heard of it but they would look into the matter.

Yarralin is one of four land titles to be granted back to traditional owners this month, totalling more than 200,000 hectares, and they are invariably after battles lasting decades. Next week will see the transfer of [the Kenbi title deeds](#), officially the longest running claim.

“The challenge with these sort of things is we have the NT government, the commonwealth, the land commissioner and the land council,” said Scullion.

“In each of these bureaucracies and administrations you can have holdups of anyone. I’m determined to ensure we speed up the process by providing an additional \$1m to the land commissioner.”

Scullion said the government would work with land councils to make claim resolutions a priority.

“But I have to say 40 years ago people had different views about land rights. Twenty years ago Territorians had different views about land rights. And I think it’s accelerating at a geometric rate. People more and more accept that this is Aboriginal land and as soon as possible we need to hand it back to Aboriginal people so they can, if they choose, move to economic development.”