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CAMP COORONG: AN ABORIGINAL 'CULTURAL CENTRE'

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Camp Coorong is situated about 200 kilometres south-east of Adelaide adjacent to South Australia's Coorong National Park. Its full name is Camp Coorong Race Relations and Cultural Education Centre and it was established in 1987 by the Ngarrindjeri Lands and Progress Association, the local Aboriginal organization. This Association continues to coordinate and develop Camp Coorong's activities. Most of the Aboriginal people involved with Camp Coorong live in the country town of Meningie on the shores of Lake Albert and they identify as Ngarrindjeri people. The Lower Murray and Coorong area in South Australia is seen by Ngarrindjeri people as an important part of their 'traditional country'. Through a discussion of Camp Coorong's activities and objectives it can be argued that Camp Coorong provides a useful model for the development of other Aboriginal 'cultural centres'. The South Australian Museum's connection with Camp Coorong can also be seen as an indicator of how major Museums can play a part in the establishment of local Aboriginal cultural centres and develop effective working relationships.

Camp Coorong combines camping and accommodation facilities with its own unique stretch of indigenous vegetation and fauna on the shores of the Coorong. The available facilities include a large kitchen and dining area, two bunk houses, a toilet and shower block, a camping area and a house for the manager. A cultural museum has been established as part of the complex to assist in interpreting and preserving the history and culture of the Ngarrindjeri people. This was developed in consultation with the South Australian Museum. The Camp is also part of a farming property and farming skills are taught to younger Ngarrindjeri people.

* This paper was presented at the 1990 Conference of the Australian Museum Association in Canberra.
One of Camp Coorong's main objectives is to improve relations between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people. Camp Coorong's staff argue that this can be achieved by following the invitation extended in their publicity leaflet:

Come and learn about Ngarrindjeri history and culture from Ngarrindjeri people at Camp Coorong.

They also place high on their list of objectives the need to reinforce the cultural identity of younger Ngarrindjeri people through teaching them about their culture and history. Central to all of Camp Coorong's objectives is the belief in the importance of preserving and developing Ngarrindjeri culture.

As a result of Camp Coorong's focus on education, South Australia's Education Department is provided with an invaluable opportunity for students to learn about Aboriginal culture and history directly from Aboriginal people. It is also partly the central educational objective of Camp Coorong that enables the Ngarrindjeri Lands and Progress Association or NLPA to obtain funding from a variety of Government agencies including ATSIC. Camp Coorong does generate some of the funding for running costs through charging for its camps. However, funds for salaries and capital expenditure are obtained through Government sources. A considerable amount of voluntary labour is also contributed by the local Aboriginal community. Camp Coorong's variety of financial sources enables 'success' to be measured in other than purely economic terms. It is measured more by the popularity and effectiveness of the cultural camps and by the training programmes for younger people. Farm work, use of heavy machinery, office work, building and environmental management are some of the areas in which this training has taken place.

Camp Coorong began as an experiment in alternative teaching methods developed by Ngarrindjeri people such as George Trevorrow. George Trevorrow was employed by the Education Department as a regional adviser in Aboriginal education. The development of Camp Coorong became his main objective. At present, Camp Coorong does not receive ongoing funding from the Education Department, although it is heavily used by schools as an integral part of Aboriginal studies. Camps for school groups last on average three days and a number of people from the local Ngarrindjeri community take part. Included in
the range of activities are lessons in Ngarrindjeri crafts such as basketry and feather flowers. Tom Trevorrow, George's brother, is a trained National Parks and Wildlife Ranger and he is presently running the day-to-day activities at Camp Coorong.

As a cultural centre Camp Coorong transmits Ngarrindjeri cultural values to tourists from around Australian and overseas, to school students and to members of the Ngarrindjeri community itself. It is not just a 'keeping place' for cultural objects from the past but a living cultural centre. At Camp Coorong aspects of contemporary Ngarrindjeri culture are fostered and promoted, along with a knowledge of the past. Camp Coorong staff argue that a knowledge of one's past is crucial for building a strong sense of identity. In particular, visitors to Camp Coorong are presented with unique insights into the comparatively recent history of Aboriginal/European relations in Australia and the ways that Ngarrindjeri people have developed to survive. The people who run Camp Coorong are fully aware of their unique southern Australian Aboriginal culture with its history of invasion and cultural change. They are not self-conscious of their style of Aboriginality, they are proud of it and they are seeking to promote, preserve and develop it. They also believe that an accurate account of Australia's history has not been presented in the past and they see Camp Coorong as a place where white ignorance can be overcome and better relations between blacks and whites developed.

Since the 1960s the town of Meningie has become an important centre for Ngarrindjeri people from the Coorong area. Until the 1960s not many Ngarrindjeri people actually lived in the town; they lived instead in a number of fringe camps around Meningie. Only a few kilometres away on the Coorong was Bonney Reserve, another spot where Ngarrindjeri people were living at the time and Camp Coorong now has the lease for this Reserve. Camp Coorong's staff grew up in the fringe camps. As a major part of the cultural camp they take visitors to a number of historical sites, including the fringe camps and old farming properties that were leased by Ngarrindjeri farmers from the late 1800s through to the mid1950s. There is also an example of a farm that has continued to be run and owned by the same Ngarrindjeri family from the turn of the
century through to the present. Visits to the ex-Mission Point McLeay are also organised and the strong connections that many Ngarrindjeri people have to this place are explained. Through these tours Camp Coorong staff bring to life their history, providing visitors with an understanding of the background and some of the reasons for the circumstances in which Ngarrindjeri people find themselves today.

The Ngarrindjeri relationship with and knowledge of the environment are also key themes in the education process at Camp Coorong. For example, the local Ngarrindjeri people have considerable knowledge of plant foods and medicines. They have developed walking trails through the nearby scrub on Bonney Reserve to teach visitors about Ngarrindjeri knowledge of the environment. The Coorong area is particularly rich in fruits over the summer period and this is still a time when some Ngarrindjeri people visit the Coorong and to some extent live off the land. The area was also very rich in birds, fish and small game. The changes that have occurred to this environment through the impact of European invasion are particularly apparent to the Ngarrindjeri people occupying the bottom end of the Murray River. They talk about the fish that are no longer present, the plants that have been destroyed through grazing and the salinity and other forms of pollution in the river, the lakes and the Coorong. These destructive changes to the environment are also a major focus in the message that Camp Coorong staff pass on to visitors.

Camp Coorong’s Cultural Museum is presently organised into sections dealing with themes such as Ngarrindjeri family history, significant historic places, pre-European culture, present-day arts and crafts and the Dreaming. There are plans to upgrade the exhibition in the near future. An application has also been made to South Australia's History Trust for accreditation as a local Museum. The upgrading will not interfere with the uniqueness of the Museum as the centre of a complex of historic sites and environmental walking trails. The exhibition in the Cultural Museum is used to complement the tours of the area by providing displays of artefacts, information and visuals about the past and its connections with the present. Information presented in the Museum is being generated partly
by joint research projects with the South Australian Museum, which also supplies artefacts on long term loan.

The SA Museum's role in the development of 'cultural centres' such as Camp Coorong can provide a useful model for similar relationships between major Museums and cultural centres around the country. The SA Museum holds an extensive collection of cultural material and information relating to Ngarrindjeri people. Through working with Ngarrindjeri communities a significant exhibition about Ngarrindjeri culture and history has recently been developed at the Museum in Adelaide. This exhibition has generated valuable information that can be used in the development of exhibitions in regional Ngarrindjeri communities. The SA Museum has a commitment to making the results of its research and its collection resources available to Aboriginal communities. Assistance with the development of cultural centres is a comparatively new, but increasingly important way of carrying out this commitment. Today all researchers working on Aboriginal culture must be prepared to plan effective methods for making the results of their research available to the Aboriginal people with whom they are working. Joint research projects with Ngarrindjeri communities have been developed by the SA Museum and the results of this research are being incorporated into the resources and exhibitions at places like Camp Coorong. Museums have special skills and resources in the area of exhibition development and research and they should be encouraged to use these to assist Aboriginal communities in the development of cultural centres.

Camp Coorong is a good example of an effective cultural centre. It appears that its success has a lot to do with the Ngarrindjeri Lands and Progress Association's ability to identify significant and realistic objectives. They have selected as a central function for Camp Coorong the provision of an active teaching programme dealing with Ngarrindjeri culture and history. This programme is not just aimed at the Education Department; it has a number of potential audiences including Ngarrindjeri people, school students and both Australian and overseas tourists. The concept of a cultural camp has proven, for Camp Coorong, to be an effective principal teaching technique, allowing visitors time to learn through direct contact with Aboriginal people. The
decision to place Camp Coorong Museum's exhibition and collection of historical and cultural information in a supplementary educational role to the activities involved in the cultural camp should be carefully assessed by other cultural centres. Some 'cultural centres' rely mainly on exhibitions for teaching and often these exhibitions are organised along art gallery lines rather than the more educational approach that Museums use.

An active research programme and support for contemporary cultural activities are two further functions that Camp Coorong has identified as important for a cultural centre. Camp Coorong encourages research into the history and culture of the Ngarrindjeri people. At present it has a particular research interest in the fringe camp history of the Meningie and Coorong area and Ngarrindjeri uses of and knowledge of the environment. In the area of contemporary cultural activities, Camp Coorong acts as an outlet for Ngarrindjeri arts and crafts. It also conducts training programmes to develop employment skills for younger Ngarrindjeri people and workshops in Ngarrindjeri arts and crafts. A number of cultural centres around the country appear to be developed mainly as exhibitions and selling outlets for art and crafts. They are designed to cater more for the tourist market. Centres with these objectives are often compelled to be self-supporting at an early stage of their development and sometimes fail as a consequence.

There are number of planned cultural centres that have already or will be incorporating some of the ideas used at Camp Coorong. There are plans to develop a centre similar to Camp Coorong on Fraser Island in Queensland. The Fraser Island people have been in contact with Camp Coorong and would like to establish a cultural exchange programme. The Brambuk Centre in the Grampians in Victoria will be opened in December (1990) and during the planning stages representatives from this project visited Camp Coorong for discussions. The establishment of new cultural centres provide opportunities for Museums to work with and assist Aboriginal communities in areas of research and exhibition. Cultural centres are also providing mechanisms for important cultural contacts between Aboriginal communities in different parts of Australia.
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