



# Three Bark Canoes

Project Evaluation

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## Executive Summary

The Three Bark Canoes (3BC) project was developed by the community arts organisation, Wurinbeena Ltd. This organisation is comprised of Elders and Aboriginal and non-Indigenous members of communities in East Gippsland. Objectives of this project included connecting young men with their cultural heritage and bridging some of the social cleavages which exist within and across those communities. A team of researchers tracked the project across most of 2017 and its afterlife up to September 2018 as part of an evaluation they were commissioned to undertake on behalf of the Cultural Development Network (CDN). The research team employed methods including observation, informal interviews, expert opinion and trialed others, to measure transformation of Aboriginal men's sense of cultural belonging as they took part in traditional bark canoe-building. We observed significant positive community impact in dimensions of both cultural and social wellbeing in a range of areas, with the stronger outcomes being in the cultural domain. To date there has not been a successfully completed canoe build, but nonetheless the project has achieved its cultural development objectives, and strengthened the relationships and processes which will likely lead to the continuing practice of bark canoe-building in these communities. 3BC had significant, measurable impacts on participants' sense of belonging.

### **The Three Bark Canoes Project, Context and Objectives**

The 3BC was a project of Wurinbeena Ltd, an organization which seeks to '...ensure Aboriginal culture in East Gippsland is visible and positively represented' (Wurinbeena, 2017). Under the guidance of Elders Lennie Hayes and Frank Harrison, 3BC set out to engage young Aboriginal men in the region from various ancestral backgrounds, bringing these men together and passing down cultural knowledges required to produce a bark canoe in keeping with those traditionally produced by Gunnai and other Aboriginal Peoples of the region. It was hoped that alongside connecting these young men with elements of their cultural heritage and thus increasing their sense of belonging and security within their cultural identities, Elders might also aid in bringing men from different social groups together, breaking down some of the existing rifts within and between local communities while fulfilling other responsibilities to Country.



## Background

### Lakes area community profile

The project took place in and around the townships of Lakes Entrance, Lake Tyers Beach and Bairnsdale in East Gippsland. The Shire of East Gippsland is a relatively remote region of Victoria (defined by the Australian Bureau of Statistics as ‘urban regional medium’) with a small, dispersed, aging population (median age of 49.7 years), high rates of unemployment and other indicators of social disadvantage such as average household income of \$621.00, approximately 70 per cent of the national average (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2017).<sup>1</sup> The Lakes Entrance and Lake Tyers area is itself at some remove from the biggest regional center Bairnsdale, where most community resources and services are concentrated.

### Local Aboriginal Communities

The East Gippsland region has an Indigenous population proportionate to the national average (1,289 people) – around 2.9% of the regional population (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2017) – who, as elsewhere in Australia, have a much younger age profile than the rest of the population (median age of 25) and experience significant social disadvantage, marginalisation and discrimination. Uneven distribution of resources across the region is an issue for the population generally, but is a factor that exacerbates tensions between its numerous Aboriginal communities.

The divisions between communities of different geographical localities (Lake Tyers Trust, Lake Tyers Beach, Lakes Entrance, Bairnsdale, Orbost and elsewhere), kinship relations, and structures of authority and access to, combine in a complex web of community relations. Social cleavages among different community members and communities themselves were a constant feature throughout the ‘project timeline’ and notably well before the project’s conception. Both of the Elders directing 3BC and most of the young men directly involved with the project resided in Lakes Entrance. These Elders reported that for the last 20 years or so, they, and Aboriginal families like theirs in Lakes Entrance excluded from the Trust structure and recognition as traditional owners, have been known as, ‘the outsiders’. As Lennie put it, “before native title we was all just Blackfellas, Gunnai, one mob.” This fact is crucially important to the project participants’ sense of belonging.

## Methods

### Evaluation Background

Elders from Wurinbeena identified the outcomes they wished to see achieved through 3BC and these were then matched to outcomes located in CDN’s framework. In consultation with Wurinbeena, CDN

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<sup>1</sup> These figures do not disaggregate Aboriginal and non-Indigenous residents and anecdotally these would be considerably poorer for Aboriginal residents.

instructed the research team to focus on the impact of the project on: a) participants' 'sense of belonging' in terms of their connection to a shared cultural heritage, b) participants experience of bridging social divisions. In the CDN framework, cultural belonging can be understood as one of five measurable outcomes of cultural activity:

*This outcome is about how cultural engagement can offer illumination of the present by providing a sense of continuity with the past, and a pathway to the future. It is about appreciation of history, heritage and cultural identity; a strengthened connection to the past; sense of being part of a historical continuum; as well as insights into the present through understanding of the past; insights into the past. As the shared past cannot be changed, the desired endpoint is a positive connection to it (Dunphy and Smithies, 2017).*

### Research question

We set out to learn how this experience of belonging has been impacted upon or transformed in relation to the experiences of Elders and 'young' men participating in 3BC. A secondary objective was trialing a methodological tool or framework being developed by CDN that professional and governmental organisations, their policy officers, community liaisons etc., can apply in their own evaluative work on arts projects in future.

### Evaluation Team and Process

The evaluation was a team effort involving generous cooperation from Wurinbeena guided by key Elders Lennie and Uncle Frank, and Wurinbeena Secretary non-Indigenous artist Catherine Larkins. RMIT University researchers from the Centre for Social and Global Research led by Dr Peter Phipps and assisted by PhD candidate David Pollock, were supported by advice from Professor Barry Judd and CDN's Kim Dunphy, John Smithies and Holly Schauble.

Researchers used a combination of participant observation and informal interview techniques to understand the project and its impact on community participants. Elders worked with the RMIT Research team providing input into the methodology for the evaluation, educating researchers on protocols around communication and engagement with the young(er) men of their community.

### Project Participants

#### Leaders: Elders

3BC was led by two key Elders from the community at Lakes Entrance. Uncle Frank Harrison and Lennie Hayes are respected community Elders, senior knowledge-holders and men with custodianship responsibilities to Country. They both led 3BC because of the knowledge they held concerning men's business, the respect they had in their community (and beyond), and the relationships they had and could develop with young men of the area.

We gradually learnt from these Elders that their sense of accountability is not just to a 'project' in the present, but to ancestors and to future generations. This responsibility was most visibly manifest when the men had to learn the intricacies of harvesting bark by 'reading' the scars of trees previously



harvested from many decades before and ensure that their own harvesting scars would be legible to the men who need to read this in the future. The men's ancestors and future generations could be understood in the language of project management as 'key stakeholders'.

### **'Young' men**

The 'young' men on this project could more accurately be referred to as 'younger', most having children of their own. They were all of a younger generation(s) to the Elders leading the project and 'younger' in the sense of being suitable recipients of the transferable cultural knowledges and wisdom that these Elders sought to impart. Consistent with Aboriginal cultural ethics, the strongest incentive to participation seemed to be a direct familial connection with the Elders leading the project. Young men were typically enfranchised through their kinship relation to Elders, often as sons or grandsons.

Elders were able to engage four young men at different stages of the project to date, and others more loosely connected through other related activities such as Corroboree on the Water. Throughout the evaluation the RMIT Research Team noted significant difficulties in engaging young men.

### **Challenges/Barriers to Participation**

At times Elders spoke of the difficulty in motivating young men to engage in the project and more generally. The level of engagement from participants waxed and waned with a number of barriers to maintaining a consistent, deep engagement with young men in the region. Chief among these were financial strains. Younger men faced difficulty with mobility (transport) and obligations such as fulfilling arduous processes in order to receive Centrelink payments. Some young men's participation was limited by social/health problems including circumstances of poor mental health or substance abuse. Other barriers included the consequences of belonging to communities targeted by over-policing and resulting hyper-incarceration. Often a number of these considerations conspired to prevent young men from actively participating in 3BC.

### **The project activities**

#### **Learning from existing canoes**

In preparation for the bark harvesting and canoe-building processes the Elders and younger men, mostly from the Three Bark Canoes core group, spent a great deal of time studying the limited number of existing bark canoes of the region. Some of these were very old, such as those stored in the Keeping Place (Bairnsdale) and others more recent, such as the one built by Uncle Frank Harrison some decades ago now housed in the entrance way to GLCH. Members of the RMIT Research Team were also fortunate enough to be shown these canoes and to be present for discussions about their design, build and what lessons may be drawn from them when attempting another build. The RMIT Research Team came to learn how canoes were incredibly rich repositories of cultural knowledge and objects which could provoke a great deal of reflection about cultural connectivity; not the only sites



with such capacities.

### **Learning from Scar (Canoe) Trees**

Scar (canoe) trees, much like existing canoes, were another site through which a great deal of knowledge about bark-harvesting and canoe-production could be discerned. The Elders and younger men meticulously studied many scar (canoe) trees and deliberated about how a successful bark harvest could be achieved and how getting this process correct was imperative for enabling a successful build.

Through this analysis and consultation over the ‘reading’ of the scar, it became apparent to researchers that there was some knowledge that the key Elders held which may have been partial, in the sense that cutting and crafting the canoes would entail some experimentation and careful examination in order to restore and/or complete some of these knowledges. This was a realisation of considerable excitement to the research team as this added to the ‘project’ an element of reclamation and restoration of cultural knowledges. This newly understood dimension would have significant bearing on an evaluation of men’s sense of cultural belonging, particularly in relation to the Elders guiding the project.

Researchers were invited to attend one trip to examine canoe trees. On this expedition it became apparent that the men related to the tree through a complex of historical and kinship ties. Rob Hudson spoke of how his brother was present at the time the bark was harvested, but would have been very young at the time. Lennie Hayes also spoke about a very important consideration for their intended harvest. Lennie articulated that it was of crucial importance that the harvest scar be left in the correct shape so that men in his imagined future, perhaps his own sons or grandsons, would similarly be able to read the scar and the bark covering it and establish how a cut should be correctly made. This was another aspect to how the scar tree was a site which acted both as a repository of cultural knowledge, but also a site of knowledge transfer across time and generations – a visible manifestation of Country’s knowledge.



*A very large (canoe) scar tree is located in Howitt Park on the outskirts of Bairnsdale, it stands just metres from a cairn erected to Angus McMillan, 'discoverer' of Gippsland and mass murderer of Gunnai and other Aboriginal people.*

### **Accessing and selecting trees**

Accessing and selecting trees was a process that was particularly difficult for the men involved with Three Bark Canoes. Logging in the region has been very extensive and there are very few remnant areas of old growth forest. Elders expressed frustration about the need to gain permission from institutional authorities to conduct their cultural business. For some places in which appropriate trees might be found this meant seeking and being granted permission from Parks Victoria or DELWP and for other places it might mean getting permission from Gunnai institutions such as GLAWAC or the Lake Tyers Trust. Either way, getting permission meant engaging in processes which would require diplomatic work navigating community relations, dealing with gatekeepers or being subjected to the indignity of having to engage with the State and its bureaucracy in order to conduct culturally sensitive men's business and justify why this should be exempt from non-Indigenous regulatory prohibitions.

It was understood by researchers that all of the core group members of Three Bark Canoes (Frank, Lennie, Rob, Adam, Steve, Damian) were involved in accessing, examining and evaluating trees appropriate for harvesting bark, some young men beyond this group may have accompanied them at some point. This process occurred over a number of months and it was not the case that all the men



did this as a collective, but rather some participated at different times while scouting for trees.

### Harvesting Bark

The successful bark harvest took place in the forest at the Bee Farm and was undertaken by Uncle Frank, Lennie and Steve. Researchers were told how this was a deeply satisfying learning experience for the men involved. Uncle Lennie was very specific that this was the most satisfying experience in the project, “When the bark came off the tree, was the best part... That’s the beauty of it; a young bloke (Steve) up the tree getting the bark. I was so happy about it, when it slid off (the tree) and feeling it in my hand.”

On the RMIT research team’s field trip immediately after the harvest they were shown the tree from which the bark was harvested and some of the experience of that process was relayed to them by Lennie. The researchers were told detail of how the incisions were made, how the piece was levered off, and of the popping sound the bark made when it simply came away from the tree without much physical exertion. The fresh scar from the tree revealed that the cut was almost half the circumference of the tree, just as the men had estimated previous cuts had been from their analysis of older scars on trees. Also consistent with the knowledge they had learnt from scar trees, the cut was squared off at the bottom and top and was of a rectangular shape. Lennie gave researchers a demonstration of how the men had dislodged the bark from the tree by leveraging sticks in between it and the tree.



*Lennie Hayes showing the RMIT research team a tree from which a successful bark harvest was taken and how this occurred.*

### The Building Site

The first bark harvest was taken to Lennie’s backyard where it was to be prepared - stripping the outer-most layer of bark (the stringy part) and soaking the piece in water before it could be shaped. During this time researchers heard from Elders and other community members that there were a great

many young men and boys present – approximately fifteen who had come to see the canoe being built. We were informed that the atmosphere in the backyard was full of excitement, with the young men, “They all got something from it: Steve, Adam, Damo and the others, Just by sitting around yarning (talking) about it. It was something different, you know”. Lennie attributed this excitement to the fact that “nobody has seen a canoe being built before”. It was also evident to researchers that Lennie and Uncle Frank were uplifted at this enthusiastic response from the young men and boys. Lennie remarked about how he thought the young men may have been feeling witnessing a canoe being built, “it’s kind of like NAIDOC day; you get to be black, but only for the one day.” It was also noted by Elders and other senior community members present at the building site that the activity was something families (extended kinship) bonded over, bringing members closer together and providing a situation for gathering.

### **Canoe shaping/Building**

The preparatory and build processes that took place in Lennie’s backyard were engaged with directly by different people at different stages. Researchers were shown photographs of these processes including some of Frances Harrison watering the bark, Uncle Frank and his grandson Damien shaping the body, and a number of photos of Lennie folding the bow of the canoe over a fire. Lennie revealed to the research team the second instance of new canoe-building knowledges developed when he inferred from the challenges he encountered folding up the bow of the craft that it would be easier to undertake this process by trimming the ends of the bark slab so that there would be less material to contend with when folding the bow and stern. This would make that process easier and it would also improve the aesthetics of the canoe, allowing for an upward facing lip.

### **Sorry business and health crisis**

At the time of the first bark harvest and canoe shaping processes, there was a culmination of Sorry Business and a health crisis, which impacted heavily on the community and particularly Elders steering 3BC. This meant that the canoe build had to be abruptly abandoned. During this time the bark hardened, bowed and became unworkable. This abrupt interruption to the build process left the participants with a strong sense of disappointment about not completing a canoe build, and a related sense of sadness from the culturally important business of mourning that interrupted it.

### **The Evaluative ‘Tool’**

CDN guided the RMIT Research Team in the use of the methodological tool which could be employed by others evaluating cultural activity outcomes. The team paid specific attention to the work undertaken already by CDN in their framework for assessing cultural impact, particularly their identified dimension of ‘cultural belonging’ and ‘bridging social divisions’.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> See section ‘cultural outcomes of 3BC’ for further detail.

The research team observed that the immediate, direct use of Likert scale survey questions (eg. “how was this experience on a scale of 1-10”) would be met with resistance by young men who were naturally distrustful of their relationship with outsider researchers. The RMIT team relied on the expert opinion of Elders, and their own expert observations from informal discussions (yarning) based around in-situ observation and participation which built rapport with project participants.

In this ‘expert opinion’ form of evaluation, we took into account:

- The context for the expert opinion- the Elders’ relationships with the young men, our own participation and observation over an extended period of the project,
- The measurable outcomes from the project: cultural belonging and social bridging
- Framing the question to Elders to consider how they and the young men saw these aspects of their experience before, and immediately after the activity.

## Evaluation results of Project Outcomes

### Cultural Outcomes of 3BC: *sense of belonging to a shared cultural heritage*

Based on our observations detailed above, and from our consultations with the project Elders, we note the following outcomes from 3BC in terms of CDN's measure of cultural belonging to a shared heritage:<sup>3</sup>

- Younger men expressed their satisfaction in participating in Three Bark Canoes, specifically they were grateful to learn from the experience of Elders, develop new skills in the harvesting of bark and building of bark canoes, heighten their experience of community and cultural connection, and to develop new knowledges specific to canoe-building or otherwise.
- Steve developed new knowledge around a specific technique for assessing the readiness of a potential harvest, and was keen to carry on this men's business, transferring this and other relevant knowledge to younger men of the community in the years ahead.
- Despite not having produced a canoe to date, Elders were content that knowledges have been transferred to some of the younger men involved. Uncle Frank was proud of his grandsons Steve and Damian, who had learned a lot out of the canoe-building/bark harvesting processes. Uncle Frank evidenced this by repeating what Steve had told him: "Pop, once you're gone, it'll be okay. I know what to do now."

**When it came to the experience of harvesting the bark, Lennie and Frank rated this as a 10/10 for all involved; the young men and themselves. They were similarly enthusiastic about the experience of the canoe-build in the backyard up to the point of interruption. Based on our observations of the entire project, including all these factors and no canoe being completed, we assess the cultural belonging aspect of the 3BC project for participants as 8/10.**

### Social Outcomes of 3BC: *social differences bridged*

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<sup>3</sup> 'Heritage and cultural identity appreciated; Strengthened (*sic*) connection to the past; Sense (*sic*) of being part of a historical continuum; Insights (*sic*) into the past, present and future' CULTURAL DEVELOPMENT NETWORK. 2016b. *Sense of belonging to shared heritage experienced* [Online]. CDN Website: Cultural Development Network. Available: <https://www.culturaldevelopment.net.au/outcomes/cultural/sense-of-belonging-to-shared-heritage-experienced-belonging/> [Accessed 20 May 2018].

Throughout this research we have been interested in the participant's sense of *social differences bridged* due to their engagement in this activity. CDN sees this as, “Thinking of this as positive connections developed with people who are outside their immediate social circle or from whom they feel socially divided.”

Based on our observations detailed above, and from our discussions with the project Elders, we note the following outcomes from 3BC in terms of CDN’s measure of bridging social differences:<sup>4</sup>

- Elders had originally hoped to enfranchise young men from different clan and kinship groups. By the ‘end’ of the ‘project’ Uncle Frank and Lennie did not really think that these divisions had been remedied by the project.
- The developing and consolidation of kinship ties was also a key benefit of young men’s participation. Steve spoke of the highlight of the project for him being the opportunity to spend time with his “Pop” (Frank) and Lennie, learning through participation in cultural work, a unique experience for him.
- For one young man who was struggling with unemployment and social isolation, it was observed by other participants that engagement with 3BC gave him something to be a part of and presented an opportunity for him, perhaps where little others were available. It was thought this had helped with his confidence and “brought him out of his shell a bit”.
- Lennie said, “It brought the young ones of Lakes Entrance together, but as far as GLAWAC and the Trust go- it should be about everything together (but isn’t). Culture is how you share it, they do it on their own, but don’t share”.
- We observed that the link with the Indigenous cultural Keeping Place in Bairnsdale, in particular with its director Rob, was deepened by the project.

**Lennie and Uncle Frank offered an evaluation of the 3BC project in light of its ambitions of bridging these social divisions and creating a broader sense of community belonging as “only a 5/10”. Given our observations of the relationships developed with one key Indigenous organization and significant contact with others, we could say this outcome measures at 6/10.**

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<sup>4</sup> CDN’s description of this outcome: ‘This outcome is about how a sense of positive connection can be developed with people who are outside our immediate social circle or from whom we feel socially divided. These people might be like or unlike us. They might be people we know and who are *like us* in the broader context, but from whom we have some social distance...The connectedness between people who feel socially different from each other in some way is often referred to as ‘bridging social capital’.’ CULTURAL DEVELOPMENT NETWORK. 2016c. *Social Differences Bridged* [Online]. CDN website: Cultural Development Network. Available: <https://www.culturaldevelopment.net.au/outcomes/social-differences-bridged/> [Accessed 20 May 2018].



## Conclusion

RMIT University researchers tracked and evaluated the Three Bark Canoes (3BC) project as it evolved across most of 2017 and its afterlife up to September 2018. We observed significant positive community impact in a range of areas including: the direct engagement of four young men in the project (and indirectly many more), deepening cultural confidence and sense of belonging of Elders and others in the project, renewal of interest in canoe-related men's cultural knowledge by a number of young men and others in the community. These impacts exceed the project's cultural goal to engage young men with Elders in building bark canoes. The project was less successful in achieving its ambitious social objective in bridging deep social divisions. It is noted that while to date there has not been a successfully completed canoe build, the project has achieved and exceeded its cultural development objectives, and strengthened the relationships and processes which will likely lead to the continuing practice of bark canoe-building in these communities. 3BC had significant, measurable impacts on participant's sense of belonging. The final conclusion about the project is best expressed by Elder Lennie Hayes, "At the end of the day, if it didn't work (the canoe build), it just brought families together."

At the conclusion of the project we see the significant cultural and social outcomes identified in this report, and the community-researcher relationships built during the research process, as a solid basis for further research with this community and branching out beyond it into a comparative study. Wurrinbeena Elders and Board members have expressed heartfelt interest in engaging in an ongoing research relationship, and the possibility of being part of a larger comparative project. We propose that the CDN framework and its associated methods could be the basis of research comparing the outcomes of cultural activity in this community, with Indigenous communities in other regions (such as NSW and the NT). This research would track the process and outcomes from very specific cultural development projects, as these communities work to both plan and execute new forms of cultural activity that assist in the process of intergenerational knowledge transmission.



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