



Into the wilds of Cape York

By Jamie Haskell, Rural Fire Service District Training Officer

Recently I had the opportunity to travel with some very astute and esteemed gentlemen into the wilds of Cape York.

My friend and colleague, paramedic Paul Elliott from the Indigenous Coordination Unit (ICU), invited me to join him on a journey into the Aurukun homelands to visit the outstations to the south of the Aurukun community.

Another member of the ICU, Counter Disaster Rescue Services representative Mark Sarago drove up from Cairns with Paul to join our spiritual journey, while the fourth member to join us was Rod Muller, the ambo from Coen.

The plan was to overnight in Coen and head out the next morning into the wild country south of the Aurukun Community.

The next day we then headed south before turning off on the Yarraden Road, then headed west, passing through a number of properties such as Yarraden, Holroyd River and Kendall River.

We called into the Kendall River homestead so I could do a stocktake on the firefighting equipment and also catch up with the homesteaders on how the aerial burning program panned out for them.

I flew over this country earlier in the year dropping incendiaries for the hazard reduction burns and it was great to actually see the country from below. It surprised me how different the country was from under the canopy opposed to above it.

Off down the beaten track, we found a nice place to camp, next to the Archer River, and after setting up the camp, I set off to breathe in some nature.

Next thing my hand-held radio sounds off with 'Jamie, you better come back, we have company'.

Hearing the stress in Mark's voice, I finished observing the spectacular Palm Cockatoo that was just overhead and made my way back to the camp.

Too late. The visitors had already left and it turned out that two vehicle loads of Indigenous residents from Aurukun had stumbled on our camp and wanted to know what we were doing.

In full paramedic uniform, Paul explained that we were there to restock the first aid kits at the homelands and to observe the fire stick burning practices.

The uniform definitely made the difference. The lads were from the local brigade and were more than

happy to show us the homelands.

They were setting up several native bee hives in the area and invited us to join them the next day at the Wathaniin Community Correctional Centre. It was no longer a correctional centre, but a night in prison is always an interesting concept.

The next day, we met with our friends and promptly headed off to where the bee hives were being set up.

This also doubled as GPS training for the workers as they





Paul Elliott, Rod Muller, Mark Surago and Jamie Haskell.

took numerous coordinates and documented the location of all the hives.

We were then led across some amazing open swamps through and around to an outstation (Aayke - pronounced ike) right on the Kirk River. Hundreds of wild horses water foul and wild pigs were seen all along the way.

At each homeland we were put through some gruelling initiations that we all survived.

As we made our way back to the 'prison', we observed the 'burning

of country', which was in much need of some good hot fires.

In some of the places fire was not as frequent as I had expected. Probably due to the remoteness, the people didn't get into all areas on an annual basis. To me, it may have mirrored an ancient burning practice.

We visited around a dozen different homelands all in pristine locations with beautiful water holes surrounded by lush green grass or on rivers full of wildlife.

The following day, we drove to a few

more homelands for a final look at a homeland (Tiitch) not far from the beach, all the time burning country that was in need.

We then parted company with our Indigenous brothers and headed for Coen.

We planned to camp at Merapah Station on the way out, but the roads were so good that we passed through, only stopping briefly to speak to a family.

Afterwards, heading out through Mungkan Kandju National Park, we all realised that we might be lost in this part of the Cape if it wasn't for the hospitality and excellent tracking skills of our Indigenous friends.

I fear we would still be somewhere in the long grass living off wild cattle, hogs, barramundi and the other foods this country yields.

Rod's love for cooking was an added bonus; his very dull chainsaw was a scary sight though.

Mark as usual was great company and witnessing his tracking skills through the melon hole country was an experience.

Thanks to Lord Paul for keeping us all sane. If it wasn't for him I might have been still sitting on the edge never to return.

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