



Kimberley Land Council

MEDIA RELEASE

After 18 years, Traditional Owners of the Fitzroy River get native title

After an 18-year land rights battle reminiscent of David and Goliath, the Nyikina Mangala people have been recognised as the Traditional Owners of their land in the central Kimberley.

More than 300 people attended the determination where the Honourable Justice John Gilmour of the Federal Court recognised the native title rights and interests of the Nyikina Mangala people. The on-country hearing was held at Lanji Lanji along the Fitzroy River, 40km south-west of Derby on May 29.

The Nyikina Mangala native title claim area covers more than 26,000 square kilometres and extends from the mouth of the King Sound below Derby, along the Fitzroy Valley to Noonkanbah and south into the Great Sandy Desert.

Exclusive possession native title rights were recognised across more than 40 per cent of the claim area, including three Aboriginal pastoral stations, a large tract of Unallocated Crown Land in the Great Sandy Desert and smaller pockets within the claim.

KLC CEO Nolan Hunter said securing recognition of native title for the Nyikina Mangala people had been a long struggle. He said they had endured stalling tactics and delays from the State Government and third parties and as a result of failed negotiations were preparing to litigate the claim through the Federal Court.

“Resolving native title through litigation is a long and arduous process that is extremely costly, so to have this claim determined with the consent of all parties has been a big win for the Nyikina Mangala people. We welcome today’s decision,” Mr Hunter said.

“After more than 20 years since the introduction of the Native Title Act, it is disappointing to see that we still have to fight big battles for our rights and interests to be recognised, especially in this case where the evidence clearly showed that the Nyikina Mangala people have a strong and unbroken connection to their country.

“I would like to acknowledge the steely determination, persistence and never give up attitude of the Nyikina Mangala people. This determination is credit to your hard work and character as a strong and resilient people.”

Nyikina Mangala Traditional Owner Anthony Watson said today’s native title determination was long overdue but it was time for his people to look to the future.

“This determination has taken a long time and I would like to recognise our old people who set us in good stead by teaching us about our culture so we could keep it strong, but also instilled in us solid values of community, traditional knowledge and respect,” he said.

Mr Watson said native title gave the Nyikina Mangala people the right to have a say about what happens on their country.

“Our country is resource-rich and as a result is almost completely covered with exploration and mining tenements,” he said.

“Now that we have our native title determined, let’s hope it provides us with some protections but more importantly gives us the respect and recognition of being landowners with rights and interests. “We are not spectators; we are real players and want to be at the forefront of any decisions made about what happens on our country.

“We want to ensure that native title benefits our people, our country and our culture.”

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John Watson breakout:

John Watson took a stand that day at the Noonkanbah protest because he wanted to achieve land rights for Aboriginal people. Finally on May 29, his day came when the Federal Court recognised the native title rights and interests of the Nyikina Mangala people.

“Today is very important for me; for my lian. My sadness is over, I have the native title I wanted and waited a long time for. My lian is good. I will be able to sleep straight,” he said at the determination.

“I was fighting then because we couldn’t let the mining company just walk into places and drill holes. In this present moment we need to use our PBC and our native title to try and stop all these sorts of things from happening.”

Today Mr Watson still has a battle on his hands – as the Nyikina Mangala country he comes from is resource rich with uranium, gold, oil, gas and coal. As a result, his country is almost covered with mining and exploration tenements.

“We started the land council all those years ago to fight for our land rights and make sure mining companies just didn’t do what they wanted. The KLC has helped us do that,” he said.

“We belong to this land; we love this land. I love this land. I hunt. I walk; I take kids at risk through the country that I know and I would like people to support us; mining companies, the government and other people of our towns.

“I hope native title is going to help us. I hope our PBC will help us. I don’t want to leave a bad land for my young people. The door is not open for mining but open to sit down and talk and get a good feeling. We want to get a good outcome.”

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Notes:

For elder and land rights activist John Watson, getting native title recognition for his Nyikina Mangala people had been a long journey

From the days of flying the flag at the Noonkanbah dispute to campaign for Aboriginal land rights to finally getting

It's been a long battle for Nyikina Mangala elder John Watson. Since his days as a strident campaigner of Aboriginal land rights at the Noonkanbah dispute, to the

It's taken John Watson 36 years to achieve what he set out to that momentous day at Noonkanbah when he took a stand to fight for Aboriginal land rights. That day And finally on May 29, the native title

Thirty-six years. That's the time since John Watson took a stand at the Noonkanbah protest to fight for Aboriginal land rights.

But it wasn't until May 29 when the native title rights of the Nyikina Mangala people were recognised that he achieved what he set out to on that momentous day.

to achieve what he set out to when he took a stand at the Noonkanbah protest to fight for Aboriginal land rights. At the Nyikina Mangala native title determination

has passed since that momentous day when John Watson took a stand at Noonkanbah to fight for Aboriginal land rights to the day those rights were recognised across his country.

"Today is very important for me; for my lian. My sadness is over, I have the native title I wanted and waited a long time for. My lian is good. I will be able to sleep straight," Mr Watson said at the Nyikina Mangala native title determination.

A lot has happened since that day back in 1978. The KLC was formed by Aboriginal people for Aboriginal people as the peak land right's organisation in the region. Eddie Mabo successfully won a High Court challenge that paved the way for Aboriginal land rights and the introduction of the Native Title Act in 1993. And none of it would have happened without the strength and determination of people like Mr Watson.