

## **Statement from the hosts of the Walgett Food Forum - "Food and Water is Life"!**

### **Dharriwaa Elders Group-UNSW Yuwaya Ngarra-li partnership**

'Yuwaya Ngarra-li' is the community-led partnership between the Dharriwaa Elders Group (DEG) and the University of New South Wales (UNSW). The purpose of Yuwaya Ngarra-li is for DEG and UNSW to work in partnership to improve the wellbeing, social, built and physical environment and life pathways of Aboriginal people in Walgett through collaborating on evidence-based projects and capacity building, and to evaluate, as a model of collaboration to achieve long-term change.

Yuwaya Ngarra-li has been working on a number of issues that the DEG and others in Walgett have long been concerned about. This includes water - in particular, the health of the Barwon and Namoi rivers and the quality of Walgett's drinking water now that it comes from the Great Artesian Basin. We have been obtaining expert advice from Dr Jacqui Webster of the George Institute for Global Health regarding the health implications of the high sodium levels in our drinking water. We have been scoping water solutions for the Walgett Aboriginal Medical Service (WAMS) Community Garden and the design of chilled drinking water kiosks for the township with Professor Greg Leslie UNSW Engineering and the Global Water Institute. We have been working with NSW Health to advocate for improved communications to the community about the water as well as pushing for longer-term solutions such as desalination units.

### **The Food Forum built on this work and Yuwaya Ngarra-li's long-term collaboration with WAMS.**

The Dharriwaa Elders Group has identified the need to improve the supply of and access to available affordable nutritious food in Walgett as a priority for Yuwaya Ngarra-li from key community concerns raised in our Community Data Gathering in December 2018 and in our community consultations and workshops developing the Action Plan for Children and Young People in April and May 2018. These concerns include:

- the lack of affordable healthy food options and social places to eat is having an adverse impact on health.
- the degradation of the rivers over time and the most recent rapid stopping of flow have had increasingly devastating effects on sources of food.

### **To learn from and act on these community concerns and perspectives, the aims of the Yuwaya Ngarra-li Food Forum were to:**

- Provide data and research about what is known about food issues relevant to Aboriginal people in Walgett and impacts on long-term health and wellbeing
- Gather community members and critical services, organisations, and other stakeholders together to discuss food issues in Walgett
- Facilitate a public forum that is action oriented and focused on positive strategies and evidence-based solutions

The Yuwaya Ngarra-li team produced a community briefing document for Forum attendees which provided background data and research on food issues for Aboriginal people in remote areas, a compilation of recent Walgett LGA data regarding diabetes and results of a family food basket survey where we compared the cost of Walgett IGA staples one month before the Food Forum with the same items sourced in Sydney the following week.

### **Walgett Food Forum on 8<sup>th</sup> April, 2019**

The Food Forum was held in the Community Hub of Walgett Community College Monday 8 April 2019 and attended by around 50 people. These included the managers of Supa IGA Walgett and Café 64; the town's three community gardeners; Principals, Aboriginal Education Assistants and canteen cooks from Walgett Community College; staff from Legal Aid NSW and NSW Family and Community Services; Walgett Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations members and staff including from the Walgett Local Aboriginal Land Council, Dharriwaa Elders Group, Walgett Aboriginal Medical Service, the Walgett Aboriginal Education Consultative Group and the emerging men's group; staff from Koolyangarra Pre-School; and a number of Elders and interested community members. Professor Eileen Baldry, the academic lead of Yuwaya Ngarra-li provided facilitation.

Secretary of DEG Virginia Robinson welcomed Forum guests. She set the scene for the Forum by remembering that she always loved the word 'food', and what she personally used to eat as she grew up. She spoke of how colonisation devastated food for Aboriginal people and that now we realise it was a big mistake to interrupt how Aboriginal people ate. She asked that the Forum consider that Elders were brought up on rations of white flour, sugar and tea and today Aboriginal people still have the habits from those rations days, enjoying johnny cakes, dampers, cups of tea. She reflected that where once Aboriginal people supplemented rations with bush foods and animals they can no longer do that, especially now that there is no water and no animals.

Walgett Community College students Charmaine Doolan, Delta Swan and Abbey Ashby followed the Elders official Welcome, giving a lengthy and considered Acknowledgement in Yuwaalaraay/Gamilaraay Language, referring to how Country is precious to the Walgett Aboriginal community.

Christine Corby OAM, CEO of Walgett Aboriginal Medical Service gave a keynote address in which she advised that WAMS has been progressing issues of community concern re healthy living with Dharriwaa Elders Group and Yuwaya Ngarra-li in line with its Strategic Plan. Christine Corby cited the Walgett Aboriginal Medical Service's knowledge that

*the quantity of and quality of food is not always nutritionally balanced according to a person's individual dietary requirements.*

and noted some issues that affect food availability in Walgett, including that:

*Having a kitchen that has capacity for food storage, refrigeration, preparation and cooking can be an inhibiting factor. To understand menu planning, cooking with cheap cuts and the ability to freeze leftovers is not always a manageable arrangement. WAMS applaud the schools and TAFE for offering opportunities for children and adults to enrol in and participate in cooking courses.*

Christine Corby's address listed some of the Walgett Aboriginal Medical Service initiatives undertaken to tackle rising chronic disease in Walgett and recommended that the Forum produce a five year planned approach to work to bring to the community outcomes such as flowing rivers, quality domestic water supply, expansion of community and backyard gardens and the employment of Environmental Health Officer, increased fresh healthy Walgett food options, increased health and wellbeing practices, exercise, mental wellbeing and a Royal Commission into water.

A "Food in Walgett – Past, Present and Future" Panel was facilitated by Wendy Spencer, DEG & Walgett Yuwaya Ngarra-li Project Manager, with Clem Dodd (DEG Speaker), Kim Sullivan (Orana Haven/Weigelli Aboriginal Hub) and community member Robyn Morgan contributing. It highlighted food eaten today and how food is influenced by history, access and affordability. Community food feasts and how takeaway food outlets and school breakfast programs are used were discussed, and this Panel drew out from all present at the Forum a commitment that 'no child will go hungry in Walgett'.

Gamilaraay woman Tracy Hardy of Wattleseed Nutrition presented information about community food projects and why they are needed, drawing on examples of her work as a dietician in Aboriginal communities. An interesting part of her talk included the work some of her colleagues have been doing to harvest highly nutritious native foods for their communities.

Associate Professor Jacqui Webster of the George Institute for Global Health then presented information about the levels of sodium in Walgett's drinking water and potential impacts on chronic disease and some shocking facts regarding the links between food and preventable chronic disease. She also presented evidence from her worldwide work that helped us understand ingredients for success for community food projects.

Paul Champion, Executive Principal Walgett Community College, told the Forum about his plan to provide daily school meals to the College staff and students and introduced school gardeners Luke Farr and Winston Westcott who spoke on their dreams for school food production.

The Forum finished with over an hour of proposals and input from the floor, all of which was recorded by Yuwaya Ngarra-li to inform the development of an Action Plan. Proposals included regular community dinners and fortnightly cook-ups where different foods and recipes can be tried, expanding the WAMS Community Garden to build children's involvement, therapeutic home gardening, the potential for harvesting bush foods, advocating with food manufacturers, advocating for health standards for food and drinking water and relating them to Closing the Gap in Aboriginal Health and wellbeing, and establishing a community food co-ordinator position.

The following morning participants were invited to work with us to further develop the Action Plan at DEG. The ideas raised in the Food Forum were discussed and issues of scalability, co-ordination, young people's activities, growing collaboration and increasing participation of community in both community gardens were discussed. Tracy Hardy was able to give further advice about the benefits of snap frozen food when fresh not available and all again affirmed a commitment to working with IGA, taking into consideration their difficulties with suppliers but also the influence they have on community food outcomes. An interesting discussion began regarding native honey and environmental concerns for the survival of bees locally. Work to develop the quality of our collaboration with Council in actions to improve food and drinking water was also discussed. Some of the Yuwaya Ngarra-li team met with the new Walgett Shire Council General Manager Greg Ingham that morning and reported to the Action Plan workshop.

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