

Amern Mwerr, Utopia Kids Come Home and Cook Healthy Take Away

In the Central Desert, 250 km northeast of Alice Springs you will find Alywarr Country and within this desert country the Utopia Homelands. The homelands consist of 18 communities, some more than 30 minutes' drive to the local store.


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The Amern Mwerr project began in Utopia ten years ago with conversations between a visiting Public Health Nutritionist and community members who expressed concern about accessibility to healthy food. Existing efforts by community members to grow fruit and vegetables close to their homes were evident; some people were saving seeds from vegetables purchased at the store and building their own gardens out of found materials. Ten years on, there are fourteen gardens across the Homelands.

Amern Mwerr means good food in Alywarr, the main language spoken on the Homelands, and that's what the project is all about. It is a community development project that seeks to increase access to fresh fruit and vegetables through two primary objectives: building food gardens and providing ongoing horticulture and maintenance support, paired with a nutrition and cooking program, to support people to harvest and eat the fresh produce they grow.

With funding from the Bill Raby Diabetes Fellowship, Arid Edge Environmental Services (AEES) has been able to develop and produce a kids cook book *Amern Mwerr: Utopia Kids Come Home*

and Cook Healthy Take Away. The book is a continuation of ideas formulated during the successful *Amern Mwerr Cooking Stories Book* 2019 which encouraged healthy home cooking. It is known that take away food is another significant food source in the diet of community members. Current take away foods offered are predominantly high in saturated fat, sugar and low in nutritional value. Utopia residents suggested an Amern Mwerr project to take a look into this.

During school holidays Amern Mwerr facilitated youth cooking programs in Utopia, aiming to develop food preparation skills, increase familiarity with cookbooks, kitchen appliances and healthy eating practices, and to provide meals for kids during holiday times. Utopia kids chose and trialed a selection of recipes that they thought would serve as culturally appropriate and nutritious take away food options. The kids cooked large quantities of each recipe with ease and deemed them simple enough in preparation and ingredients to be produced as take away foods or lunch/snack options for schools and community events. This book is a small collection of their favourites.

In addition to the recipes, the book also includes key messages related to good health and nutrition, as well as some messages from community members, parents and local organisations. An electronic version of this cookbook can be accessed on the *Australian Indigenous HealthInfoNet* healthinfo.net.ecu.edu.au

The Amern Mwerr Project is currently managed by Arid Edge Environmental Services (AEES) operating across 8 Alice Springs Town Camps and on the Utopia Homelands. The project is funded by Primary Health Network NT, Tanentyere Council and the Department of Health, NT.

A short film about the Amern Mwerr Project Utopia can be found at youtu.be/TmUBg6QRJ1w



Community Food Garden in Gapuwiyak

In early 2020, the Gapuwiyak Youth, Sports & Recreation Program – YSR, East Arnhem Regional Council received a small grant through Healthy Living NT to support the development of an edible garden/s in the local area. The YSR team conducted consultation with various leaders in the community to ascertain what species of plants would be viable for the Gapuwiyak community. Tropical fruit plants were unanimous.

Mid-2020, amongst the COVID-19 lockdowns and restrictions, a shipment of edible fruit plants was ordered from Darwin via barge on pallets. The plants arrived in Gapuwiyak healthy, thriving and were met with great excitement from the YSR Team and wider community. Plants included a bustling collection of guava, passionfruit, pineapple and papaya.

Due to COVID-19 restrictions in the region and local area it was challenging to launch a project involving a crowd. Lost for direction, the YSR team sought consultation with a partnering stakeholder organisation – Yirralka Rangers, comprising of Elders and Leaders of the community. The collaboration provided a strong direction forward for how the plants would best thrive and provide purpose to individuals, families and community. The decision was made to support future efforts for Yolngu peoples to re-integrate with their respective homeland more frequently/permanently by placing the plants across three different prominent close-by homelands (Raymingirr, Yalakun and Balma) in hope that the plants would thrive and grow year after year to provide food. The Yirralka Rangers agreed to monitor and manage the plants to ensure they survived.

Additionally, the YSR team also consulted the Yirralka Rangers on what other types and species they would like to order with the small amount of funding remaining in the project. Kasava, banana, sweet potato, paw paw, lime and pumpkin were the most desired and practical. The remaining funds were spent to order small batches of each once they became available.

The project had multiple positive outcomes, the most outstanding being the opportunity to support the further development of surrounding homelands. The relationship between YSR, Yirralka Rangers and the wider community, including Elders and Leaders was strengthened during the process, which in-turn led to greater collaborative outcomes in other areas of community development.

The plants will now continue to provide food to each of the homelands, as well as a healthy activity (plant management) for residents of the homelands. Additionally, this will help reduce the burden of food expenses often faced in very remote communities with low income rates, as well provide healthier options of food to strengthen the physical health of homeland residents to assist in overcoming burdens of health disease.




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Diabetes in Youth – Alice Springs



In early 2019 the YMCA (the Y) started a conversation with local endocrinologists and health organisations on how we could assist with their Diabetes in Youth (DIY) Program.

Diabetes is common among young people in Alice Springs, in particular the indigenous population. At times it can be very hard for allied health professionals to regularly connect with these young people to monitor their condition and continue educating them about how to care for their diabetes. The DIY program involves a monthly catch up where young people with diabetes can connect

with allied health professionals, learn new things and have some fun. Before the Y came on board these sessions were held in a room at the Alice Springs Hospital. Staff found that this was not an inviting space that young people wanted to attend. We now host these DIY sessions at the Y and incorporate a number of different activities.

The 2019 Bill Raby grant allowed us to buy various types of sports equipment to use for these sessions. At the start of the year we had only 2 young people attending the sessions at the Y and by the end of the year we had up to 10 regular attendees. Each session consists of an organised sport or active activity, a short education session and healthy snack and then some more activities. The feedback we received from the endocrinologist is that the kids absolutely love the sport activities and it has been a big draw card to get young people to attend. The Y offers a more welcoming environment than the hospital. To be able to host such sessions and see the increase in attendance of the program has been great! It is good to see everyone who attends getting amongst it and having a hit at table tennis or shooting some hoops.

We now have a much larger reach than just the original organisations involved. These include Healthy Living NT, Yirara College, Congress and Alice Springs Hospital staff. The program will continue to grow as we try to reach out to local youth centres and see if any young people in these spaces can benefit from this program.

