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This is not a time to be silent...

by Southerly | Apr 27, 2017 | Blog | 0 comments



by Natalie Harkin

What would it take to listen to the Traditional Owners to learn from the lessons of the land to respect voices that refuse to be bought buried sold?

– *Zero Tolerance, Dirty Words*

When our Premier Jay Weatherill announced the *Nuclear Fuel Cycle Royal Commission* in February 2015, I wrote a letter – a poetic narrative tracing radioactive and colonising currents from French, American and British bomb tests on Pacific atolls, to Fukushima’s nuclear power plant disaster, and a potted-history of uranium mining, nuclear power and atomic testing in South Australia. This controversial tale of epic proportions with direct impacts on Aboriginal lands and people, includes: national and international nuclear waste dump proposals; illegal waste dumping, leaks, seeps and spills; Acid In-Situ Leaching (ASL) methods contaminating remnant palaeochannels and underground flows, impossible to measure; overflowing toxic tailings dams; Russian and American owned exploration licenses and mines, with defense and weapons research agendas; secret atomic bomb tests; un-remediated and un-protected decommissioned mines and facilities; and transport fears over containers of yellowcake being driven across country, through residential suburbs, and shipped out via Port Adelaide’s *Lefevre Peninsula, marine park* and dolphin sanctuary.



South Australia boasts the nation's first uranium mine, *Radium Hill* (1906–1961), on Ngadjuri and Wilyakali lands, near Olary on the SA–NSW border. The company built a uranium ore treatment plant at *Dry Creek* (1923–1932), an Adelaide industrial suburb and significant wetland with tidal–distributary flows through to Barker Inlet, St Vincent's Gulf. *Wild Dog Uranium Mine* (1953–1955) on Kurna land near Myponga, the Fleurieu Peninsula, remains an un–remediated, un–protected radioactive site only 65 km south of Adelaide. *Mount Painter* (1910–1932) mining and exploration occurred within the Arkaroola Wilderness Sanctuary, adjacent the culturally and environmentally significant Vulkathunha–Gammon Ranges National Park and the Lake Frome Regional Reserve, and is now part of the Arkaroola Protection Zone. The *Port Pirie Uranium Treatment Complex* (1955–1962) processed uranium ore from *Radium Hill* and *Wild Dog* mines that was contracted to United States and United Kingdom nuclear weapons development programs. This *Complex* remains contaminated, and ongoing environmental and public health issues are being addressed thanks to dogged protests from an outraged community who watched their children play in the poisonous slagheap. Significant palaeochannel uranium deposits have been found in the Frome Basin and northern Flinders Ranges, on Adnyamathanha lands, and engage contentious Acid–In–Situ Leaching (ASL) uranium extraction methods. They include: *Beverley Uranium Mine* (2001), *Beverley North Uranium Mine* (2011), *Honeymoon Uranium Mine* (2011–2013), and *Four Mile Uranium Mine* (2014). The *Olympic Dam Uranium Mine* (1988), on Kuyani, Kokatha and Banggarla lands, is the world's second largest uranium deposit with a controversial environmental impact track record, including: excessive water–use and impact on the Great Artesian Basin, minimal ground lining in its tailings

impact on the Great Artesian Basin, minimal ground mining in its tailings dams, which are vast and open, and toxic dust issues.



In addition, the *Woomera Prohibited Area* is an off-limits 127,000 sq. km of pastoral country in SA's far north. It has been used for secret military weapons testing including atomic bomb tests, joint defence projects, rocket launches and other experimental programs. The British and Australian Government nuclear bomb tests between 1953 to 1963 on Pitjantjatjara, Yankunytjatjara and Kokatha lands, included two 'Totem' nuclear tests and Emu Fields, seven tests at Maralinga, and numerous minor tests resulting in extensive radioactive contamination devastation, of country and people. The *Nurrungar* ground station near Woomera was a satellite and weapons research 'Star Wars' base for the US Defense Support Program, utilised for US military strategy during the Cold War, Vietnam War and Persian Gulf War. It was decommissioned in 1999 after peaceful anti-nuclear community protests that turned violent due to infamous, extreme police brutality.

Human rights abuses, environmental destruction, and racism throughout this uranium and nuclear defense history has been rife, with fierce community opposition. Traditional owners have led many protests given the direct impacts of such explorations, experiments and mines, akin to what Narungga elder and social justice campaigner [Tauto Sansbury](#) calls 'cultural genocide'. I've spoken at length about these issues with my good friend, colleague and *Unbound Collective* collaborator, Antikirnya / *Yankunytjatjara* woman Simone Ulalka Tur. She was raised in a community of senior women activists, and intimately knows the intergenerational effects of the Emu Fields and Maralinga nuclear bomb tests on her family. She notes: *Aboriginal people have been fighting this for decades – generation after generation after generation. We argue that the proposed waste disposal facility is a violation of our human rights.*

In a previous column *On Coalitions for Hopeful Futures*, I refer to the role of ‘coalitions’ and ‘alliances’ in making strategic and hopeful responses to ongoing threats, especially to land, livelihood and culture. The *Kupi Piti Kungka Tjuta* is one such collective that rejected the 1998 Australian Federal Government’s plans for a national radioactive waste dump on their lands. Their six year *Irati Wanti ‘The Poison, Leave it’* campaign was unwavering and successful. It was, as Simone states, *grounded in the senior women’s knowledge and responsibility to [and ‘as’] country and [a result of] direct family effects from the Maralinga atomic bomb tests (1950–60s) on their waltjapiti (family) country, physical and spiritual well-being. The Kungka’s spoke out and did not stop telling their stories.*

Last year, Premier Jay Weatherill established a Citizens Jury to assist the community consultation process for our State’s ‘nuclear future’, including the question of a nuclear waste storage facility on Adnyamathanha lands. Alongside senior Adnyamathanha knowledge holders, Simone was called as a witness with her sister/cousins Rose and Karina Lester, daughters of Maralinga atomic test survivor Uncle Yami Lester, representing the *Yankunytjatjara Native Title Aboriginal Corporation* (YNTAC). The resounding message from the large group of Aboriginal witnesses in the Citizens Jury process was, as [Karina Lester](#) (YNTAC Chair and anti-nuclear activist) stated, a *strong NO against nuclear waste storage facility in our Ngura, our land.*

Two thirds of the 350 jurors ultimately rejected the proposition to establish a nuclear waste storage facility on Adnyamathanha lands, based on the rights of traditional owners, a lack of trust in the government, and a poor economic case. Simone observed the legacy of the *Kupa Piti Kungka Tjuta: this [Irati Wanti] campaign continues to influence and shape activism around nuclear waste storage in Aboriginal within South Australia and nationally, within Aboriginal communities, with non-Aboriginal communities, from older and younger generations, to political parties and to everyday citizens.*

For this blog, I asked Simone to consider the teachings of the *Kupa Piti Kungka Tjuta*, her mothers and grandmothers, and their influence on her PhD research and work as an academic in the higher education space:

The Kupa Piti Kungka Tjuta's cultural teachings have taught me the importance of always caring for country and to stand strong against government proposals to 'poison' the land and our lives. The stories and powerful messages of 'No Poison' continue to be sustained from generation to generation. What I do know that I must never stop talking about nuclear waste storage as part of my praxis which is embodied, taught from senior knowledge holders who have a powerful message of Irati Wanti. So I tell their stories and remind students of their campaign and that even more attention to their activism is needed within the current political and international climate.



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