

## **The plight of Minmarama Aboriginal Villagers in Darwin: living in a Prescribed Area under the Northern Territory Emergency Response Act and as neglected tenants of the Gwalwa Daraniki Association.**

Despite much opposition from Ludmilla residents, in the early 1970s a suburban rubbish dump was opened by the Darwin City Council to serve as land fill into the mangroves of Ludmilla Creek behind Namarluk Drive in Ludmilla (Figure 1). Later the dump was extended by the Council by digging a series of trenches to the north of Fitzer Drive, under the airport flight path (Figure 2). After Cyclone Tracy, the site was extended to accommodate whole suburbs of wrecked houses scooped up by front end loaders and tipped into the mangroves to the seaward side of the old dump. Hundreds of refrigerators and household goods created a potential toxic mixture of chemicals buried in the haste to clear the devastated city. Even a ship's cargo of beer cans, written off by insurance, was carted direct from the wharf and buried in the landfill trenches. More seriously, eyewitnesses saw dozens of Army-issue cans of the harmful and long-lasting insecticide, Dieldrin, dumped at Ludmilla. Over the years these containers and white goods will corrode and will release their deadly gasses and chemicals into the soil, air and ground water.

In 1975 questions had been raised in the Kulaluk land claim hearings before the Interim Aboriginal land Commissioner, Judge Dick Ward, as to who would be responsible for the rehabilitation of the dump site if the land was granted to Aborigines. Despite these misgivings, in 1979 the abandoned Ludmilla dump was included in land granted as a Special Purpose Lease to the Larrakia Gwalwa Daraniki Association, incorporating most of the old Bagot Aboriginal Reserve between Totem Road and Ludmilla Creek (see *Bunji: a story of the Gwalwa Daraniki Movement*). By this time the dump had been burning underground for years and was in a dangerous state; however, plans had been submitted for the old dump to be converted to sports fields (Figure 4). Others had put the dump to good use – between 1975 and 1976 Fred Fogarty and his wife Violet Adams had constructed a magnificent house on an island in the mangroves, built from material salvaged from the discarded ruins of Darwin in 1975. The house stood proudly on the Kulaluk lease until Fred's death in 1985 as a model of Aboriginal initiative (see Figure 2).

In 1986, after considerable opposition, development began on a proposed village to house homeless Aboriginal people, then known as 'transients' (see *The Darwin Advertiser* April 1983, 'Kulaluk controversy continues'). At great expense, the old dump site was capped and compressed by dumping tonnes of fill to build up foundation pads for the new Minmarama houses on the Kulaluk lease, making the housing blocks undoubtedly the most expensive in Darwin. This housing development was done despite the fact that Minmarama is inside the 'cyclone surge zone' designated after the tragedy of Cyclone Tracy (see inside cover map). In the event of a cyclone warning, all Minmarama residents must seek shelter because their homes could be inundated by a cyclonic rise in sea levels, should a cyclone occur on a high tide (the tides rise and fall up to 8 metres in Darwin). While Minmarama residents flee, other Darwin residents may remain safely in their cyclone-proof homes. Belatedly, after the subdivision of low-lying land in nearby Coconut Grove building permits are now being refused in the Primary Storm Surge Zone.

In 2006, in a private financial arrangement between a Darwin construction company and the Gwalwa Daraniki Association, heavy trucks began to bring in truck loads of fill excavated from major building sites in the Darwin CBD. The dumped fill quickly grew into an artificial mountain. The resulting monstrosity, overgrown with weeds, became known locally as 'Ludmilla Heights'. However, the mountain of building rubble with dumped concrete mixes running down the slopes like lavaflows was no joke for the residents of Minmarama who had to live alongside heavy trucks driving through the village, churning up the unsealed access roads and endangering the lives of their children. In addition the clouds of dirt from the dumping caused dust and possible health problems. For example, not only were householders' vehicles and washing coated in dust but there was also the possibility that the dumped material was contaminated from historical activities on the excavation sites, as occurred at the oil tank storage farms in Stuart Park.

By 2010, after many complaints to the NT Government, it was disclosed in a letter from Dr David Ritchie that the earth dump was in contravention of the lease and the material would have to be removed (Department of Lands and Planning to Margaret Clinch, 31 March 2010 [Figure 7]). Although Dr Ritchie's letter was a victory for the Minmarama residents, they now have to endure the return of heavy vehicles and the dust clouds, noise, damage to roads and danger to children caused by what has become a virtual urban **open-cut mine site** next to Minmarama (see Figures 8-11, Photographs of earth stockpile works, 2011). No other Darwin suburb would be expected to tolerate such an inconvenience.

As well as the earth dump to the north, Minmarama Village residents are concerned that a private dump was negotiated in a 'sweetheart deal' between another Darwin building company and the Gwalwa Daraniki Association, to allow the certain company to dump undisclosed building waste directly into the mangroves behind the village. Ironically, the main concern expressed by villagers was the locked gate erected by the builders around the dump site which had until then been used by residents as the village rubbish dump.

Although Minmarama Village residents see themselves as regular citizens of Darwin, in 2007, under the federal government's *Northern Territory Emergency Response Act, 2007* (NTER), also known as 'The Intervention', a large sign was erected at the entrance to the village stating that the area was forthwith a 'Prescribed Area' with heavy fines for possession of alcohol and pornography, even within the homes of the residents. The sign standing beside the busy arterial road of Dick Ward Drive states in big letters, 'No Pornography', publicly humiliating the residents by suggesting the village is a den of vice. In addition, the restrictions are unenforceable without unacceptable surveillance. Alcohol may indeed be a problem, but it has proven to be difficult to enforce the bans in the city of Darwin. Under the NTER Intervention the residents of Minmarama have been set apart from the rest of Darwin and have lost what little rights they may have possessed.

As a final gesture of contempt for the residents' rights, in March, 2009 the Gwalwa Daraniki Association signed a caveat with Even Lynne of Gwelo Investments Pty Ltd to surrender the land surrounding the village

to construct a huge marina known as ‘Arafura Harbour’. The billion-dollar project would cause years of disturbance and destruction of the mangroves and Ludmilla Creek ecology (see Figure 3). The *NT News* later reported that money had already changed hands in the deal (‘Landowners already cashing in on marina’, April 6<sup>th</sup>, 2009). The GDA lawyer, Michael Chin, told the newspaper: ‘A developer doesn’t go on and prepare detailed plans unless they can get some commitment from the landowners.’

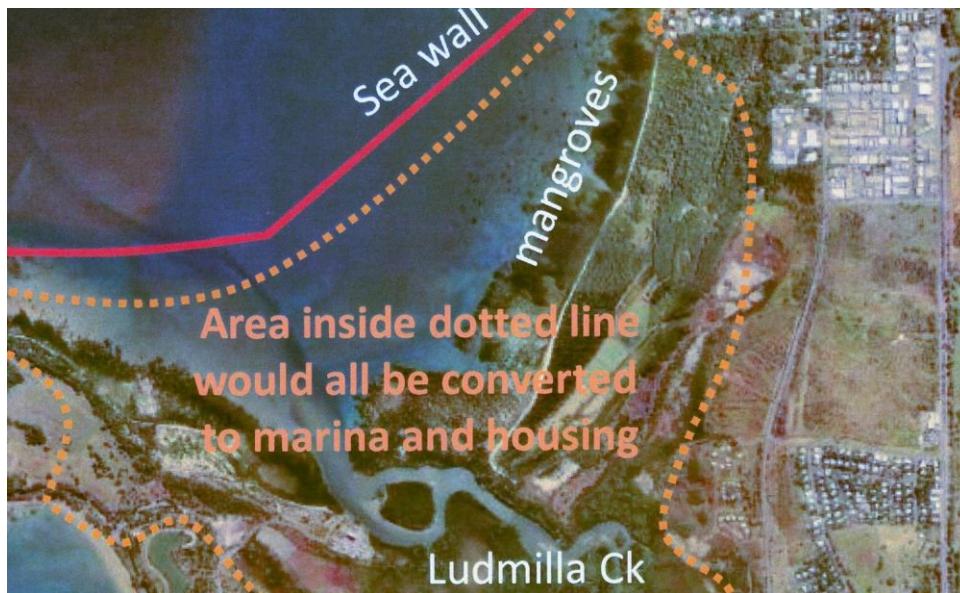
Considering the above list of concerns of the Minmarama residents, the remaining grievances appear minor. They include a smelly neighbouring sewerage treatment plant and sewerage outlet into the creek, and sandfly and mosquito plagues. In addition, the residents have an ongoing list of complaints regarding the administration of the village by their landlords, the Gwalwa Daraniki Association. The state of the internal roads is a disgrace, while long grass in the wet season provides a hiding place for snakes and mosquitoes and gives a neglected appearance to the village. It is no wonder the residents ask, ‘Where does our rent money go?’ William B Day, October 2011



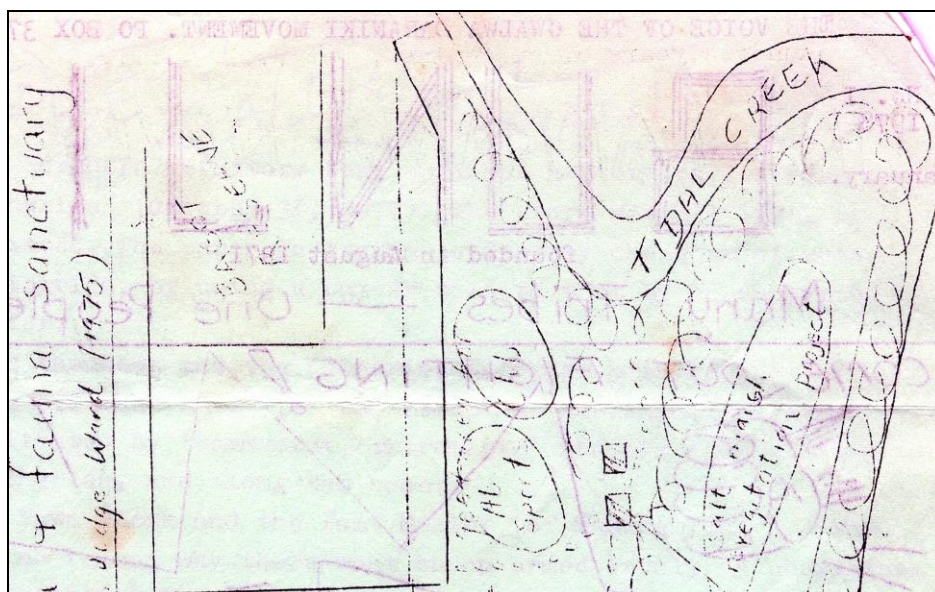
**Figure 1 (above):** The Ludmilla dump site in the 1974 before it was extended further into the mangroves after Cyclone Tracy.



**Figure 2 (above):** The Ludmilla Dump site in 1984 after rapid expansion in 1975, before the construction of Minmarama Village in 1986-7 and aquaculture ponds in 1997. The original Kulaluk plans were for community sports fields on the land-fill dumps.



**Figure 3 (above):** Minmarama Village (pictured) would be affected by the construction of a marina and canal housing estate on the Kulaluk lease under a caveat signed between the Gwalwa Daraniki Association Inc as leaseholders and the developers, Gwelo Investments Pty Ltd.



**Figure 4 (above):** A section of the sketch plans for the Kulaluk lease prepared by the Gwalwa Daraniki Association in 1978 showing 'Bagot Reserve', Ludmilla Creek and two sports fields on the Ludmilla Dump area.