Kulaluk Aboriginal burials Mindil Beach burials Ted Egan

25 July 2018

The Editor

NT News

Dear Sir

Thank you Chelsea Heany for revealing that hundreds of Aboriginal people are buried in undocumented graves at Barunga (NT Weekend, 21 July). Prior to the 1960s, Aboriginal people were not usually buried in registered cemeteries. Instead, traditional burials were held wherever and whenever families may choose, so that unmarked and undocumented graves are common throughout the Territory. Probably for this reason, and to facilitate developers, the Heritage Act was amended to exclude gravesites from the protections applying to sacred sites.

In Darwin there are many accounts of Aboriginal burials at Mindil Beach and other locations. Judging by newspaper reports, the accompanying ceremonies often provided a public spectacle. In 1981 the NT News reported that eleven skeletons were unearthed during earthworks for the Mindil Beach casino.

It is also know that more than 200 burials took place between 1938 and 1965 in unregistered graves in bushland between Totem Road and Ludmilla Creek. Ted Egan writes of attending funerals off Totem Road, a street named after the burial posts of the Tiwi people. I have also recorded an eye-witness account of a tree burial in the area. In1947 a newspaper described how an elderly woman was buried on the old Bagot Aboriginal Reserve along with the wire bed on which she died. The protection of these unmarked burial sites was a compelling reason given for the Kulaluk land claim, and the 1979 return of 301 hectares to the Larrakia people as a special purpose lease.

In more recent times, various developers have applied to rezone much of the Kulaluk lease, promising only to cease work if skeletal remains are exposed; however, this would be unlikely if, as planned, tonnes of fill are dumped on the site to raise the land above the cyclone surge level. Considering the above, the respect for Aboriginal burial sites shown by the NT News is a welcome change.

Yours sincerely

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