

KUPA PITI KUNGKA TJUTA AND THE NUCLEAR WASTE DUMP



The Government are not listening to Anangu (Aboriginal) people because they want to make money, and the Government are not listening to the land. They got to sit down and listen — take notice.

The Government is supposed to help us, not by killing us. Listen to the Old People, the Aboriginal people. We had enough at Maralinga and Emu Junction. They never let people know. Never ask Aboriginal people. We never tell them to go ahead, wiya — no. This time we say no. But they are still coming. We say no!

These words of the **Kupa Piti Kungka Tjuta** (Senior Aboriginal Women Elders Council of Coober Pedy) resonate widely. For across the world, large corporations and governments directed by rich and powerful interests continue to plunder and contaminate the earth's resources in the search for profits and short-term 'solutions' to long-term strategic problems. Typically those who suffer most are the poor and marginalised, not least Indigenous peoples who until then have lived in a close sustainable relationship with the land. Modern Australia's experience is no different and Indigenous Australians continue to be involved daily in struggles to overcome the threats and reality of such ecological violence. The strength, wisdom and courage of groups such as the Kupa Piti Kungka Tjuta are thus inspirational seeds of peace and hope. Their successful fight to stop a nuclear waste dump on their land empowers others in their continuing struggles.

Irati Wanti – the poison: leave it!

Aboriginal elders were compelled to form the Kupa Piti Kungka Tjuta in 1995, when the Australian Federal Government first announced plans to bury nuclear waste (primarily from Sydney's Lucas Heights nuclear reactor) in what it considered to be the remote landscape of the South Australian desert. For the Kungka Tjuta however, this is not remote landscape, but their country, their home:



'We are the Aboriginal women - Yankunytjatjara, Antikarinya and Kokatha. We know the country. The poison the Government is talking about will poison the land. We're worrying for the country and we're worrying for the kids. We say "NO radioactive dump in our ngura, in our country." It's strictly poison, we don't want it.'

The Kungkas were most concerned about the risk of nuclear contamination seeping into the groundwater that maintains life in their region of

South Australia, the driest state in the country. For many of the region's water sources are unmapped by non-Aboriginal Australians. In contrast, affirmed the Kungkas: *We know the poison from the radioactive dump will go down under the ground and leak into the water. We drink from this water. The animals drink from this water. We're worried that the animals will become poisoned, and we'll become poisoned in our turn.'*

SEEDS OF PEACE

All this after Nuclear Testing

For the Kungka Tjuta, the nuclear waste dump was the latest in a long line of government sanctioned acts of nuclear contamination in the South Australian desert, from nuclear weapons tests to one of the world's largest uranium mines. Indeed the elders knew the effects of nuclear waste intimately. For between 1953 and 1963, the British military conducted 12 full-scale nuclear weapons tests in the South Australian desert, and at the time the government told Aboriginal communities this testing was completely safe. *'All of us were living when the government used the country for the bomb. Everybody got sick. The government thought they knew what they were doing then'*, stated the Kungkas. Eileen Kampakuta Brown vividly recalls the day a black radioactive mist filled the desert skies: *'The smoke caught us. We tried opening our eyes in the morning, but we couldn't open them. Our eyes were sore, red and shut.'* Many got violently sick with radiation poisoning; others went blind; many developed cancer and quickly died. Kangaroo, emu and echidna in the area, an important Aboriginal food source, were also poisoned, whilst birth defects, cancer and asthma are now alarmingly common .



Working tirelessly, despite their age and failing health, the Kungka Tjuta brought their fight against the proposed nuclear dump to national and international attention. They travelled thousands of kilometres, wrote to and lobbied written government officials, visited Parliament House, brought their message to the Olympic games in Sydney and partnered with the environmental community in Australia's urban centres to organise the successful *IratiWanti.org* campaign.

Yet for the Kungka Tjuta, the successful fight is just a part of sharing the cultural and environmental wisdom of their grandmothers and respecting the oldest culture on earth:

*Kungka Tjuta, Wati Tjuta, Tjitji Tjuta, tjukur kulila nyinakatinyi. Many women, many men, many kids, sit down all together and listen to the story... this is Aboriginal land, the country is crying...We were born on the earth, not in the hospital. We were born in the sand...when the cord comes off, they put us through the smoke. We really know the land. Never mind our country is the desert, that's where we belong. And we love where we belong, the whole land. We know the stories for the land. The Seven Sisters travelled right across, in the beginning. They formed the land. Its very important Tjukur the Law, the Dreaming that must not be disturbed... This learning isn't written on paper as whitefellas knowledge is. We carry it instead in our heads and we're talking from our hearts, for the land. You fellas, whitefellas, put us in the back all the time, like we've got no language for the land. But we've got the story for the land. **Listen to us!***

(Members of the Kupa Piti Kungka Tjuta are: Ivy Makinti Stewart, Eileen Kampakuta Brown, Eileen Wani Wingfield, Emily Munyungka Austin, Eileen Unkari Crombie, Betty Tjingilya Muffler, Angelina Wonga, Lucy Kampakuta Wilton and Dianne Edwards.)

Sources and more information:

www.iratiwanti.org