



# Cultural Information

*General information relating to the Katherine West region  
Aboriginal communities for contractors/visitors of  
Katherine West Health Board*

## **Introduction**

Katherine West Health Board is an Aboriginal community controlled health service. It grew out of the Aboriginal Community's demand for better and more appropriate health services. Its structures for Aboriginal decision-making and control differentiate it from government or main stream non-government health services.

Working in an aboriginal community brings new challenges for contractor/visitors in understanding and working within a unique culture that operates according to traditions and rules not found in the broader Australian communities.

This document can be used as a guide to those who regularly visiting aboriginal communities within the Katherine West region. By familiarising yourself with the information contained within, you may find your ability to interact less challenging. In the field you will see things that may not make sense, this is the time to refer back to this document. As you spend more and more time in remote Aboriginal communities things will hopefully become clearer.

## **Kinship, skin groups and family structures**

Aboriginal people within the Katherine West region, the kinship system determines the social organisation and family relationships, the kinship is complex and determines how people behave with each other; who marries whom; peoples responsibilities' and obligations with respect to family, ceremonial business, and land ownership and management.

Skin groups or subsections are an important part of the kinship system. Within the aboriginal community it is divided according to a system of eight subsections. Skin names are inherited through their mother's family, there are eight male skin names and eight female skin names. People are often addressed and refer to by their skin names rather than their personal names. Subsections are;

<b>Male</b>	<b>Female</b>
Jampin	Nampin
Janama	Nanaku
Japarta	Nimarra
Jukurtayi	Namija
Jurlama	Nawurla
Jangari	Nangari
Jangala	Nangala
Japalyi	Nalyirri

A number of family relations require a specific behavior. For example, mother inlaw, son-in law poison cousin or any one called *mali* have an 'avoidance relationship'. This means that they cannot talk to each other, name each other, make eye contact, or be within each other's physical proximity.

People will usually have a first name, a skin name and a family last name. Often when a person passes away, that person's first name is no longer called and you may hear people being referred to by their skin names. Others who have that same first name will be called by another name, by their skin or the initials of their first and last name.

Sometimes when a person from outside the community establishes close relationships, they may be given a skin name. If you're given a skin name, introduce yourself and your skin, this will help people in establishing ties to you.

The family structure is an extended one. People can have many mothers and fathers, uncles and aunts, brothers and sisters etc. All people of the same skin group are brothers and or sisters. Therefore those brothers and sisters will have many fathers and mothers etc.

## ***Relationships and obligations***

Aboriginal community relationships are extremely difficult at times for outsiders to understand. A lot can be written and studied, but only through actual interaction can one really begin to understand.

All interactions are traditionally based on respect and trust. Obligations and commitments also form part of the daily life. One often experienced occurrence for the visiting worker is the difficulty in physically conducting a meeting. For the locals many obligations, commitments and aboriginal laws of respect must be obeyed. Who sits next to whom? Who can face whom? Who is allowed to talk up and who can't? These are all strictly adhered to.

Sometimes a meeting can be run more effectively if the men sit separate from the women. This is often the case for community meetings. But for small community and or committee meetings where most participants know each other, sitting in a circle with the main speakers seated apart often works best. This allows the flow of conversation to be spread evenly over the group.

Calling of people's names should be done in a way as not bring too much attention to that person, and shame them in to quietness. Always confirm matters so as to please everyone, it's no good to have passed a motion that no one supports. If possible try having an interpreter involved, an interpreter can sometimes be someone who the old people feel comfortable speaking around.

## ***Absolute Taboos***

There exist several taboos that should be avoided at all costs. Sometimes these can be unknowingly broken by mistake. The impact on Katherine West Health Board and the remote communities in the Katherine West region can be severe. These taboos generally exist on the more traditional communities. Examples are as follows:

- *Never repeat the first name of a recently deceased person, especially to their immediate family.*
- *Never force people to sit or enter a meeting. There may be aboriginal avoidance relationships present, for example a mother-in-law, son-in-law, poison cousin or anyone called **mali** have an 'avoidance relationship'. In that case there is said to be no room, meaning there's not enough room for the two people to be in the same area. But in most cases the locals will sort this out themselves. If visiting that community regularly, try to remember who's not allowed near whom or ask a senior local aboriginal person.*
- *Never mention men's business in front of women and vice versa. This includes the mentioning of sexual topics. To do so can be viewed as quite offensive and people that are present will exit the meeting and you will find yourself sitting alone.*
- *Never swear in public. This is also very offensive.*
- *Never stare at the opposite gender. This is can be very dangerous to one's health.*
- *Never freely roam throughout a community. Seek advice as to where you can travel. You may accidentally enter a sacred men's area or women's area. Usually the locals have close networks and can even detect foreign tracks in the sand.*
- *Never enter into the ceremony or sorry camp area.*
- *Never travel on a road when it said to be closed. This means that there maybe things happening on the road that you are not allowed to view. Usually the road re-opens after a few days. If absolutely necessary, seek advice before travelling.*

## ***Prohibited Areas***

Attached are maps identifying prohibited areas in the following communities: Yarralin, Lajamanu, Daguragu, Kalkaringi and Pigeon Hole.

Please familiarise yourself to the restricted areas marked in red on the attached community maps, if in doubt ask local aboriginal staff or Board Members. *Take notice of the maps of where you cannot go. There are ceremony and sacred areas that cannot be entered onto unless invited by traditional owners or elders.*

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## **Avoid if possible**

The following are things to be avoided if possible. They're not taboos but in most cases are just plain manners. They may not seem important to you, but are appreciated when followed. As with taboos they exist more on the traditional communities. They are as follows:

- *Try to ring up the community to let people know you intend to visit. You may be informed that your intended time is not appropriate. This may be due to ceremony, business, road being closed, death or sorry business.*
- *Try not to eat directly in front of people. They may also be hungry and you may notice the tempo of the meeting diminish with every bite you take.*
- *Try to take a male and female along if addressing men's and women's issues. Sometimes it's easier for people to talk amongst their own gender.*
- *Try to take a local with you when moving throughout the community. You being an outsider, the local are often up to date with issues and can often interact and communicate far easier than you. Having a local around will make it easier for locals to approach and accept you. The older this local person the better.*
- *Try to introduce yourself to as many people as possible and state where you're from. This minimizes any possible confusion later down the track. Also people want to know who's on their country.*
- *Try not to fill a meeting with techno-babble. Remember English is often a second language, the more so the older the audience.*
- *Try not to dress too formally. A person wearing a shirt and blue jeans will often interact better than a person wearing a black suit and tie. The exception to this is the work uniform.*
- *Try not to be too pushy. If people are a bit reluctant it may be due to circumstance not known to you, or you may have unknowingly insulted them. If this is the case, take a break or asked locals for feedback.*
- *If people are suddenly exiting at an alarming rate, this may be due to an argument, bad news (someone has passed away) or ceremony (business). Depending on the situation it may be easier to postpone the meeting to a later date.*
- *Try not to freely take pictures or film within the community without permission. Although what you're trying to film may be significant to you, it may be extremely private to others.*
- *There are many other issues that are of importance but these are generally left to the community members.*

## **Other relevant information**

- *Not everyone understands time. If you need someone at say 10.00am, it may be more appropriate if you send someone to pick them up, especially if they are older.*
- *English is of course a second language. This varies on the actual community you are attending. Once again the older population is less able to understand than the youngsters are. To help overcome this, it may be of help to have a member of the family present during the consultation as well as an aboriginal staff member.*
- *Aboriginal people are non-confrontational. Sometimes if they have a problem they may not say it out loud. If you were to disagree about something, some locals would rather agree than disagree and embarrass themselves, even if their argument is extremely relevant.*
- *Some people are just one generation from the bush. To expect them to be fluent with modern western life is ridiculous. Chances are they will only know community life within the Aboriginal perspective. The running of the local shop, clinic and council are as foreign to them as another language and culture is to you.*
- *Remember to maintain confidentiality*

- *Don't interfere in community or council politics, issues or fights.*
- *No photo taking of land or places without proper permission from the appropriate elders (ask the aboriginal staff if you are unsure who to get permission from).*
- *No photos of people unless consent has been given*
- *Observe the way community members dress and dress similarly so that you do not unintentionally offend.*

## **Conclusion**

As suburbanites one feels that this being Australia, everyone can read, write and understand English. But this is not always the case. Generally, the only source for western customs in communities is the television and the odd conversation with a non-indigenous person. Therefore any interaction with a non-indigenous person is often seen as intimidating and avoided if possible. This may be the case for the elderly but is the opposite for the youngsters.

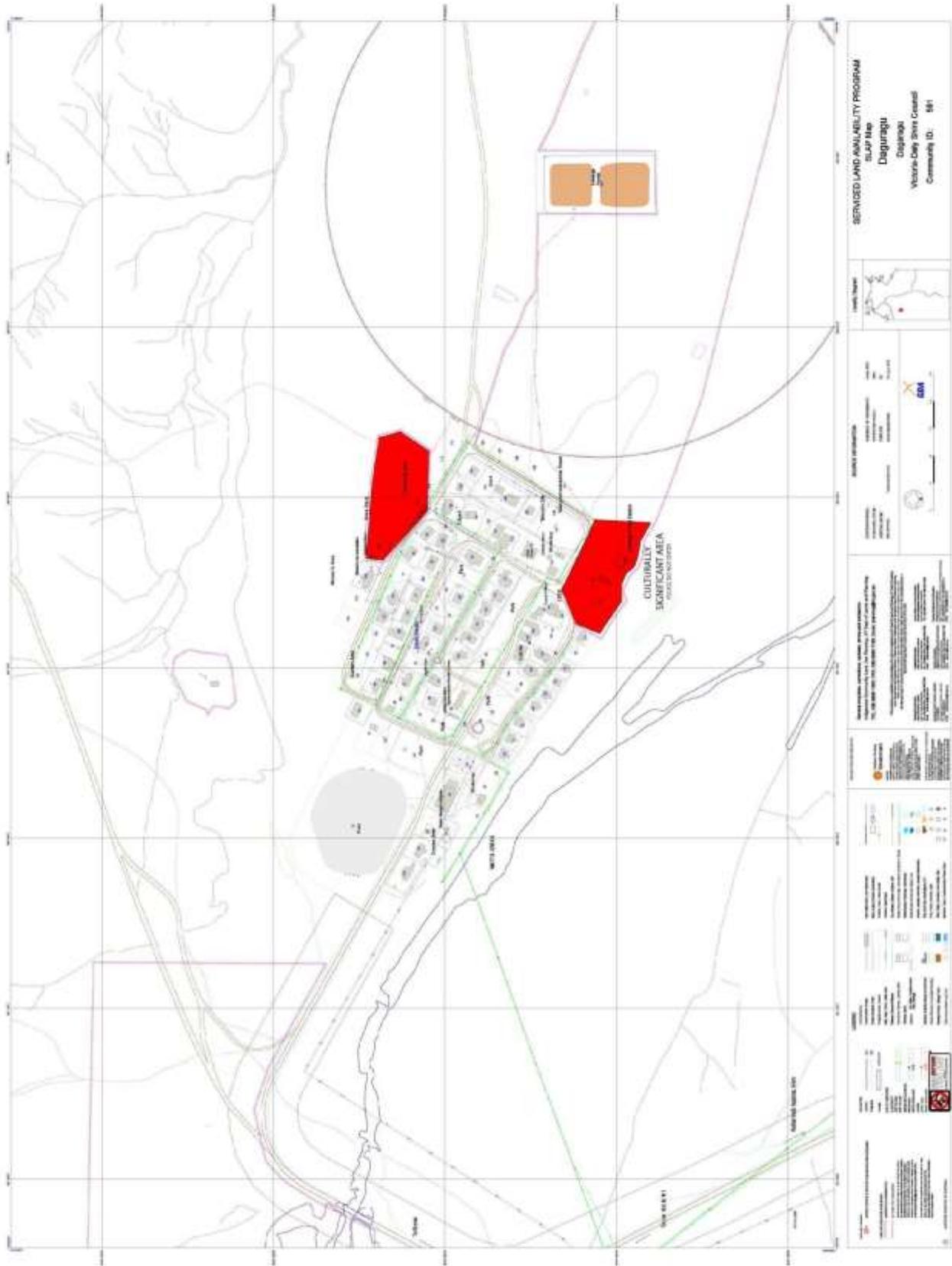
The information above may work in some areas and not with others. This could be due to many reasons, including a gradual loss of culture. But don't be intimidated, the information in this report is designed to help you and your efforts in completing your work. Approach all communities with an open mind and remember you are a guest. Be polite and treat people with respect.

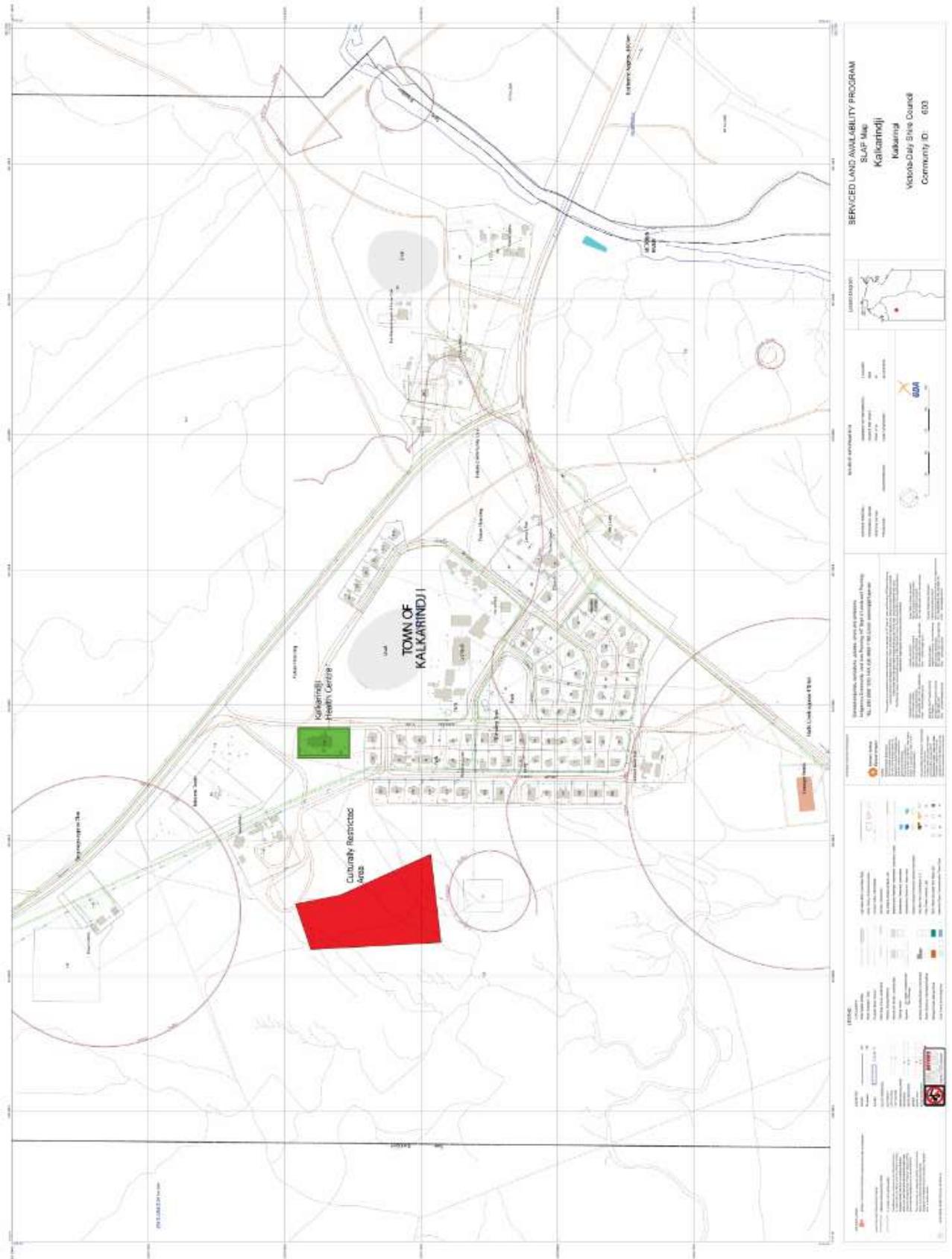
If after all this you're finding that you're still not being accepted, seek advice, your expectations may be too high. Remember that at the end of the day, you're there to work.





# Prohibited area – Daguragu





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**Prohibited Areas – Kalkaringi**

