WARRAMBANY OF WARRMARN

THE FLOOD OF WARMUN
13 MARCH 2011
WARRMARN, WARMUN, OR TURKEY CREEK?

When the community now known as Warmun was first established as a “settlement”, the English name ‘Turkey Creek’ was given to the small outpost. The Gija people of the region were not asked whether there was an existing name for the locale.

When the Gija people made the settlement their home in the mid-1970s, they started to use their own name for it and the gazetted place name was eventually changed to ‘Warmun’. In recent years, Gija people have begun to use ‘Warrmarn’ to better reflect the way the name is actually spoken, with emphasis on the rolling “r’s”.

In this book, the currently gazetted place name ‘Warmun’ will be used in general, while “Warrmarn” will be used where the cultural context is appropriate.

Front cover image
Despite the devastating Warrambany of Warrmarn in March 2011, the Warmun community is thriving in 2013. There is no better example of this than leading Warmun Art Centre artist Lena Nyadbi’s extraordinary success in Paris. A massive new work by her, titled ‘Daiwul Lirlmim (Barramundi Dreaming)’ and spanning 700m2, has been installed on the rooftop of the Musée du Quai Branly. As one of the largest art installations in the world, her work stands as a testament to the vision and resilience of the Gija people in recovering from the flood. Nyadbi paints every day and is a constant inspiration to all who live in Warmun.
WARRAMBANY OF WARRMARN

THE FLOOD OF WARMUN

13 MARCH 2011
MINISTERS’ FOREWORD

The flood in Warmun on 13 March, 2011 was devastating for its people and their community. The Government moved swiftly to declare a natural disaster and give clear direction for the safety and well-being of the people of Warmun and the rebuilding of their town.

The community told us from the very start that they wanted to return home soon. It is a tribute to everyone involved that this was made possible, and their speedy return gave the community the best chance to get back on its feet with dignity.

The achievements since the flood are a positive demonstration of what can be done when Government agencies are given a clear mandate and work together with a community with a shared purpose.

We acknowledge the commitment and achievements of the Warmun Re-establishment Taskforce, the Department of Housing, and the many other agencies involved.

We also acknowledge the cooperation and support of the Australian Government and the practical assistance provided by the Shires of Halls Creek and Wyndham-East Kimberley.

Finally, special recognition is due to the people and community leaders of Warmun, who have maintained a positive approach through the most difficult of times.

THE HON. DR KIM HAMES MB BS JP MLA DEPUTY PREMIER; MINISTER FOR HEALTH

THE HON. BRENDON GRYLLS MLA MINISTER FOR REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT; LANDS; MINISTER ASSISTING ON STATE DEVELOPMENT

From left: The Hon. Dr Kim Hames MLA, John Echo and The Hon. Brendon Grylls MLA
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The Warmun flood set in train a remarkable, challenging and ultimately rewarding process of re-building the community, both physically and socially.

The formation of the Warmun Re-establishment Taskforce brought together all tiers of government, the community and private sector for a singular purpose. The progress they made stands as a proud example of what can be achieved with a shared purpose and a clear mandate.

The rebuilding of Warmun was a genuine partnership between the private sector, and all tiers of government working across many jurisdictions, to connect with the Warmun community.

Similarly, it has been a partnership between a group of people with a common commitment to achieve great outcomes. We are very proud of the efforts and dedication of all those involved in this important undertaking.

The intention of this book is to capture, in words and images, the flood event at Warmun on 13 March 2011, and to pay tribute to the people and organisations who were involved not only on the day, but also during the difficult period that followed.

We acknowledge the resolute support of the Ministers involved, and thank the people of Warmun for their patience, resilience, and constructive engagement with the Taskforce.

JEFF GOODING PSM
CHAIRMAN, WARMUN RE-ESTABLISHMENT TASKFORCE
CHIEF EXECUTIVE, KIMBERLEY DEVELOPMENT COMMISSION

GRAHAME SEARLE
DIRECTOR GENERAL, DEPARTMENT OF HOUSING
Warrmarn, or Warmun, is at the social and geographic heart of the Gija people’s country, a vast tract of land in the magnificent East Kimberley region of Western Australia that stretches from near the Argyle Diamond Mine in the north, to Halls Creek in the south and from the Ord River in the west to the Durack Ranges in the east.

Formerly known as Turkey Creek, Warmun is located on the Great Northern Highway 190km south of Kununurra, 860km east of Broome and just over 3,000km north of Perth.

The town is built on Turkey Creek, which drains a small, steep catchment before flowing north into the Bow River and eventually into the top of Australia’s largest man-made reservoir, Lake Argyle, on the Ord River.

The Kimberley is a land of rugged sandstone hills and vast savanna, dotted with enormous boab trees. The subtropical climate has two dominant seasons: a hot, wet summer with searing temperatures and monsoonal rains and a cool, dry winter with clear skies, warm days and cool nights.

Gija people have lived in the lands around Warmun since the Ngarranggarni, or creation time, when spiritual beings roamed the land and created everything in it. This country contains their traditional hunting grounds and ceremonial sites, the songs and stories, and the resting places of the ancestors, all of which embody the past and define the future for the Gija. The stories of Ngarranggarni have been passed down orally from generation to generation for thousands of years, preserving the people’s understanding of the country and their relationship to it.

With the arrival of European settlers, ‘Turkey Creek’ was established in 1886 as a traveller’s inn and police and telegraph station to service a brief but intense gold rush in Halls Creek. With the growth of a pastoral industry, Gija people came to form the backbone of the workforce on surrounding cattle stations. Turkey Creek consequently became a tribal and ceremonial gathering place for these workers during the wet season ‘walkabout’.

Following the Equal Wages Award for Aboriginal stockmen in 1968, most Gija people were forced off the stations and drifted into fringe camps at Turkey Creek, where they set up camps with family and others who had worked on the same nearby stations.

In time, five distinct camping areas were established. These sites, known as Top Camp, Garden Area, Middle Camp, Bottom Camp and Other Side (of the Creek) have continued to define the cultural dynamic of Warmun today.
The Town of Warmun

In the late 1970s, community Elders established the Warmun Council and convinced the Government to establish the Turkey Creek Aboriginal Reserve. Following further lobbying by Elders, the Ngalangangpun School commenced taking lessons under a big tree in Garden Area, and the first basic houses were constructed in 1980.

By 2011, Warmun had developed into one of the largest Aboriginal communities in the East Kimberley, with a stable population of over 300 people.

The town comprised nearly 100 houses, a school, health clinic and police station and the internationally acclaimed Warmun Art Centre. The Warmun Roadhouse and caravan park and the Wungkul Community Store had also been established.

Following the flood, the Council guided various critical processes such as the allocation of houses, while at the same time working to re-establish social and community services and infrastructure.

Under the able stewardship of Chairman Kenneth Rivers, the Council helped the rebuilding agencies meet short timeframes by making difficult decisions quickly and efficiently.

“[The Council provided strong leadership throughout the recovery. They did a fantastic job under extremely trying circumstances.]” Ralph Addis, Chief Executive Warmun Community Council
The Gija people recognise five seasons. Jadagen is the wet season, a time of heat and water, with big rains, lightning and thunder.

In 2011, Jadagen saw a very active monsoon across northern Australia, bringing above-average falls from December to February.

By early March, the country was so water-logged that the rainwater started running straight off the hills and into the creeks and rivers. In the first half of that month, Warmun received over 500mm, which is four times its average rainfall for that time of year.

When the monsoonal trough joined forces with a slow moving tropical low over the East Kimberley, the results were devastating.

The Bureau of Meteorology rainfall map for March 2011 shows the extreme wet weather over the East Kimberley.
By the early morning of Sunday 13 March 2011, Turkey Creek was well on the rise. Over 100mm of rain had already fallen in 24 hours, and it was getting heavier.

At 6am, local policeman Sergeant Don Couper closed the single-lane bridge that separates most of the community from houses on Other Side and the renowned Warmun Art Centre. Forty-two people were stranded across the rising creek.

The waters had already risen well beyond anything in living memory, but no-one could foresee how much further they would rise.

With the Turkey Creek torrent moving closer and closer towards low-lying houses, Warmun CEO Chris Clare and Senior-Sergeant Rod Burnby made the call at 1pm to evacuate Garden Area and the Walumba Aged Care Facility.

The water continued to rise throughout the afternoon and catastrophe was imminent. When a side tributary of the main Turkey Creek channel combined with sheet-flooding from the black-soil plains to the east, the water tore through the heart of the town.

The raging torrent raced through the Warmun Art Centre, tearing windows from the gallery walls and quickly engulfing the school and the remaining community houses.

By nightfall, most residents had been evacuated to higher ground at the Warmun Roadhouse and Mirrilingki Catholic Centre, where food, shelter and comfort was provided by staff and volunteers. Some, however, were stranded on Other Side, isolated and surrounded by rising waters.

“This is the first time in history its come up this high.”

DALLAS PURDIE, WARMUN RESIDENT
The rising waters, looking down the main street of Warmun from the Great Northern Highway. The water rose a further 1.5m.
There was great relief when the floodwaters finally peaked at 8pm and began to recede as swiftly as they had risen. By first light, the stranded residents of Other Side were able to cross the bridge to be reunited with family and friends and share stories of their experience of the devastation.

In the clear light of the next day it was apparent that the Turkey Creek had risen over nine metres and engulfed almost all the buildings in town in under four hours. The floodwaters had smashed through most of the town’s houses, its school and one of its most precious buildings, the Warmun Art Centre.

While there was massive residential and structural damage, loss of life was prevented through swift action by Emergency Services, local Police and members of the community.

“It was heart-breaking to see everyone’s stuff go under water. For us on Other Side, that night was very frightening. We were on a little island with the water all around us…”

ROSELEEN PARK, WARMUN RESIDENT AND ARTIST
It is remarkable that there was no loss of life in the Warmun flood, a near-miracle put down to the daylight timing of the event. The actions of people on the ground that day also helped to prevent a greater tragedy.

Tales of bravery and courage unfolded as the day wore on. By 3pm on the day of the flood, the water was threatening Disability House, which was stranded on a disappearing island. Braving the rising waters, Sergeant Don Couper and a group of Warmun men used an aluminium dinghy to bring staff and two wheelchair-bound residents to safety.

As the waters engulfed the town centre, Cherrelle Clare, manager of the Warmun Early Learning Centre, was stranded trying to rescue her dogs from her house, unable to cross the now rapid current. Local man Christopher Churchill managed to reach Cherrelle, however, and haul her into the back of a 4WD driven into the raging waters by her husband Chris, CEO of the community.

Meanwhile, on the other side of the torrent, Maggie and Gary Fletcher struggled valiantly to save the priceless Warmun Art Collection.

Making his way through the rising waters to reach the Collection, Gary was forced to swim from one building to the next and for a terrible moment Maggie thought he had drowned. He was spared, but sadly the Collection was not.

In recognition of assistance provided in the Emergency, the WA Commissioner of Police, Karl O’Callaghan, later awarded Certificates of Appreciation to the following members of the Warmun community:

- Christopher Churchill
- Barry Malgill
- Leon Pinday
- Tommy Pinday
- Danielle Dowell
- Cecil Mosquito
- Cherrelle Clare
- Leanne Hodge
- Kathy Burnby
- Tanya Couper
- Sen-Sergeant Rod Burnby
- Sergeant Don Couper

“At least our kids were safe at the Contractor Camp. The men took the children and looked after them for us. I thank them for their help that night.” ROSELEEN PARK, WARMUN RESIDENT AND ARTIST
As the flood occurred during daylight hours, the alert went out quickly enough to prevent loss of life. Nevertheless, in the words of Ngalanganpum School Principal Leanne Hodge, it turned a quiet and tranquil country town into a 'war zone', leaving stark and indelible memories.

But the flood did more. As the water rose, the people of Warmun realised that their lives were about to change forever. Along with their belongings, the torrent took away their sense of safety and security - the foundations of the community were demolished, leaving despair and uncertainty in its place.

Well-known Warmun artist Shirley Purdie described her shock as events unfolded: “We started crying. We were really sad. We saw the flood come, and you know pouring through the hills, through the house and we saw everything going.”

While the flood waters quickly receded, the emotional scars would take far longer to fade.

“That Warrambany from last year, bin’ hanging that whole freezer up in our tree. He’s still there today.” SHIRLEY PURDIE, WARMUN ARTIST
THE ‘WARRAMBANY’ OF WARMUN
SCENES OF DEVASTATION

“There’s nothing left of my house, everything is gone. My house is about 200 metres from where it was yesterday, I’m devastated!” MELISSA MARTIN, WARMUN RESIDENT
The Great Northern Highway remained cut between Warmun and Kununurra at the Bow River Crossing.

All up, the flood destroyed or damaged 76 homes and the Health Clinic, the Aged Care Facility, Council Offices, the Early Learning Centre, the new Warmun Art Centre and the Ngalangangpum School. More than 80% per cent of the buildings in the town were destroyed or significantly damaged.

The Great Northern Highway was destroyed on both sides of the town, which meant that Warmun could not be reached by road. With some 300 residents waiting to be evacuated, helicopter drops were arranged to provide food.

The day after the flood, Warmun had no power, the sewerage system was out of order, and the airstrip was no longer operational. The late Chris Clare summed it up grimly and succinctly: “At the moment, Warmun is untenable.”

“The Great Northern Highway remained cut between Warmun and Kununurra at the Bow River Crossing.”

“The ‘WARRAMBANY’ OF WARMUN
WARMUN IS UNTENABLE

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“Some of us also feel for our dogs, it is the first time we leave man’s best friend, they never left us…”

SADIE CARRINGTON, WARMUN RESIDENT
Churchill Cann and Glenn Carrington arrive in Kununurra.
THE ‘WARRAMBANY’ OF WARMUN
LEAVING ‘COUNTRY’

During the flood, the Warmun Roadhouse became the rallying point for the community as hundreds of residents, forced to flee their homes, gathered there for basic food and shelter. Next door, the Mirrilingki Centre, a partnership between the Catholic Diocese of Broome and the Sisters of St Joseph, provided catering, accommodation and, as always, a spiritual sanctuary for the Warmun people in their time of need.

With the Great Northern Highway impassable to both the north and south, and a dawning realisation that it was not viable for people to stay in Warmun, plans were underway for evacuation to the nearest large town, Kununurra. By early Monday morning, arrangements were made for the elderly, disabled and sick to be flown out by helicopter.

Helicopters from Broome and Darwin spent the next two days air-lifting 275 people from the roadhouse and other evacuation points to Kununurra. Most were evacuated with just the clothes on their backs and only one certainty: they had no homes and no possessions to go back to.

“Warmun is untenable. Food supplies are running low, there is no potable water and people will probably have to be airlifted out.” CHRIS CLARE, CHIEF EXECUTIVE, WARMUN COMMUNITY COUNCIL
THE ‘WARRAMBANY’ OF WARMUN
THROUGH THE CHILDREN’S EYES

Even the younger children of Warmun understood that something catastrophic had occurred. For many the event started as an adventure that culminated in an exciting helicopter ride, but once they arrived in the temporary camp at Kununurra, the full impact of the flood came into sharp focus.

As the days wore on, the children from the Ngalangangpum School were asked to recreate the events, using their own words and images to help them come to terms with what had happened.

They participated in a theatre competition called Wakakirri, and the outcome was an animated video that told the story of the flood with narration by the children themselves.

Below are some of the images from an animated sequence in the video.
The Warrmarn Eagle was created by the community while in Kununurra.
Fortunately, a 200-bed workers camp, the Garrjang Village, was available in Kununurra for use as stop-gap accommodation. Purpose-built to accommodate construction workers for the Ord East Kimberley Expansion Project, a massive extension of irrigated agriculture in the Ord Valley, Garrjang was vacant while the construction works were on hold for the wet season.

With their deep connection to Country, the Gija people’s shock and loss was compounded by their evacuation from Warmun. They found themselves in the ‘big smoke’ of Kununurra, feeling culturally out-of-place in Mirriwoong Country.

To ease the cultural discomfort the Gija felt about living in someone else’s Country, the Mirriwoong people, traditional owners of Kununurra, arranged a proper ceremonial welcome for the Warmun people.

Garrjang, meanwhile, would be needed by the Ord workers in June, so a solution to housing the displaced Gija had to be found in just 12 short weeks.

Evacuated residents were provided with essentials by staff from the Department of Child Protection, who also helped them settle into Garrjang Village for their stay.

St Joseph’s Primary School in Kununurra managed to squeeze in an extra 80 Warmun youngsters and the Ngalangangpum School staff organised a range of activities for residents and kids. Youth programs such as hip-hop dancing, puppet-making, and regular trips to get “out bush”, helped people come to terms with their temporary and limited accommodation and the huge losses they had suffered.

The Warmun Taskforce, meanwhile, arranged for some of the residents to return to their homes to help them understand what had happened to their community and what would be required to rebuild the town.

“Since the day they were evacuated, all the people have been focused on, is when they can return home.” JEFF GOODING, CHAIRMAN WARMUN RE-ESTABLISHMENT TASKFORCE
SEEDS OF RECOVERY

While the evacuation was still underway, thoughts had already turned to recovery for the Warmun community.

On 16 March, just three days after the flood, Deputy Premier Dr Kim Hames MLA undertook an aerial inspection of the town and met with the evacuated residents at the Garrjang Village. The Warmun flood was declared a natural disaster under the Western Australian Natural Disaster Relief and Recovery Arrangements (WANDRRA). This ensured the costs of responding and rebuilding would be shared between the State and Federal governments.

Within a week, the WA Cabinet approved the formation of the Warmun Re-establishment Taskforce, with representatives from the community and local, state and federal agencies. Re-establishment of the town became a priority, and the Warmun Recovery Project was launched.

"Warmun will be rebuilt. There will be an issue about whether you move the township slightly, just to make it less prone to floods, and we will get on with it." The Hon. Colin Barnett Mec MLA, Premier of Western Australia
SEEDS OF RECOVERY
SIZING UP THE CHALLENGE

As the scale of the damage became clear, the need for a long-haul plan to rebuild Warmun also became apparent. The need for a detailed Flood Study, necessary to locate new buildings out of harm's way, was identified and work commenced within the week.

By the end of March, the Warmun Council was engaged in planning for the new town. Traditional owners started work with the Kimberley Land Council to ensure that heritage sites were properly protected during the clean-up and restoration process and began planning new areas for the town.

Detailed assessments of the damage, the cost to rebuild and to re-establish power and telecommunications were completed within the month, with the clean-up and demolition work also well underway by month's end.

An ambitious plan was implemented to build a 200-room Warmun Temporary Village to house the community when Kununurra Garrjang Village had to be returned to Ord workers. The first 22 houses were required by the end of June to allow for the earliest possible return to Country.

The Warmun Re-establishment Taskforce
On the 21 March 2011, the Government endorsed the formation of a Taskforce with the following Terms of Reference:

1. To draw up plans for the re-establishment of the town
2. To co-ordinate the relevant Government agencies
3. To report regularly to the Aboriginal Affairs Coordinating Committee

Taskforce members:
- Jeff Gooding Chairman Taskforce
  CEO Kimberley Development Commission
- Chris Clare Deputy Chairman Taskforce
  CEO Warmun Community Council
- Graeme Jones Department of Housing
- Craig Dale Department of Housing Project Owner
- Louise Paterson Department of Housing
- Vaughan Davies Department of Indigenous Affairs
- Tracey Gillett Department of Child Protection
- John Butcher Department Fire and Emergency Services
- Gary Powell Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaHCSIA)
- Warren Olson Shire of Halls Creek
- Gary Gaffney Shire of Wyndham-East Kimberley
The low-level crossing at Bow River, 30km north of Warmun, was ripped to pieces. The shifting of massive concrete chunks is testimony to the force of the flood.
The weather conditions that conspired to destroy Warmun caused further havoc across the broader Kimberley region.

In the West Kimberley, the tiny community of Ngallagunda, on the Gibb River Road, sustained significant damage and residents had to be evacuated to Derby.

The town of Fitzroy Crossing was temporarily isolated when the Fitzroy River flooded, while Halls Creek, 160kms south of Warmun, was cut-off for over a week. The remote communities of Balgo and Ringer Soak needed to be re-supplied by air, and the Argyle Diamond Mine was forced to close due to flooding risks.

On the Great Northern Highway, the low-level crossing at the Bow River between Kununurra and Warmun was washed out, while the high-level bridge at McPhee’s Creek was fractured and declared unsafe for use, stopping road transport for several weeks.
Warren Olson, CEO Shire of Hall’s Creek, shows the water depth through the Early Learning Centre.
Before the evacuated residents could return home, the school, health clinic and other essential services had to be re-established, if only with temporary facilities. The Taskforce, working in tandem with relevant agencies, put together a plan to ensure supply of basic services.

Catholic Education arranged for transportable classrooms to be brought in and also refurbished some damaged buildings so they could be used once again. The WA Country Health Service, which operates the Warmun Health Clinic, managed to restore their old premises sufficiently to get them back into operation as a temporary measure.

The Walumba Aged Care facility was completely destroyed but the Department of Housing installed a temporary building so community Elders who required care could return with the other residents in July.

Transportable units were also installed as a temporary base for the community office. The Bishop of Broome, The Most Rev. Christopher Saunders and the Mirrilingki Centre generously made land available for the temporary accommodation needed for key staff and contractors involved in re-establishing the community. As the Department of Housing quickly moved to assess the damage to homes, it became evident that most were too badly damaged to be repaired and would need to be completely rebuilt. Others were considered flood-prone and would have to be rebuilt in safe locations.

Under pressure to return people to Warmun as soon as possible and also free up the Garrjang Village, the Department used existing contractor arrangements to get demolition works and rebuilding underway as swiftly as possible. Over the month of April, Warmun transformed from a scene of devastation into a buzzing construction site.

In all, 56 houses had to be demolished and replaced with new homes on sites elevated above flood level. Only 20 surviving homes were able to be refurbished.

The Department’s recovery program was delivered in three phases, the first of which included the establishment of the 200-bed Warmun Temporary Village, eight refurbishments and 17 new houses, all of which were completed by 30 June - within 15 weeks of the flood.

At the same time, the Department coordinated the re-establishment of essential services (power, water and wastewater), installed the temporary aged-care facility and completed demolition to minimise any risk to safety for returning community members.
The 2011 flood (blue) extended beyond where houses (shaded brown) and key facilities had been. With little land above the flood, creative design solutions were required.
Immediately after the flood, the Department of Water began gathering rainfall and stream-flow data at Warmun and from gauging stations in nearby catchments, in order to make sense of how a remarkable rainfall event combined with catchment topography to produce a freak flood event.

Within six weeks of the flood, the Department was able to provide preliminary information to the Taskforce, which enabled the first of the new houses to be located above the flood zone.

By September, after detailed hydrological modelling, the 2011 flood was identified as a one-in-200 year event, with clear implications for town planning.

The recommendations were that:
- Any new developments should have minimum floor levels 0.2m above the 2011 flood
- Critical infrastructure (power, water, sewerage and evacuation centres) should have higher levels of flood protection
- Flood awareness and emergency response planning should be undertaken for the community

Implications for the Taskforce were significant. Much of the original town site could not be rebuilt and the whole of Garden Area would have to be moved. A new layout for the town would need to be designed in partnership with the community, and it was clear that there was limited suitable space beyond the flood zone.

Creative solutions were called for and the Department of Housing responded with elevated designs, building a number of houses on raised pads.

Elevated designs allowed building within the flood zone.
Based on the Flood Study, houses could not be rebuilt on their old sites, including the whole of Garden Area, one of the five distinct town areas that grew when the area was first settled.

Specialist town-planning staff from the Taskforce provided advice to the Warmun Council and community at an early stage. With a good understanding of the issues and risks, and time to reflect amongst themselves, the Gija people were fully engaged in making the hard decisions and to take ownership of the outcomes.

When residents returned to their new Warmun homes, they would be living in new and different camps. Consultation was paramount.

A representative from the Department of Housing assumed responsibility for engaging the community, creating working groups to identify and resolve the often fraught issue of who would live where. It was important to give the community sufficient time to decide what they wanted for their future.

**SEEDS OF RECOVERY**

**PLANNING FOR THE FUTURE**

A series of community meetings were held to plan the rebuild. From left: Jeff Gooding (Taskforce Chair), Johnny Echo (Community Council) and Chris Clare (Community CEO).
With the Kununurra Garrjang Village available for only three months, returning the people to a re-established Warmun was a priority.

Although there was a national shortage of transportable modular accommodation (colloquially known as ‘dongas’) due to the resources boom, a suitable ready-made portable camp was identified by the Department of Housing. Arrangements were made for it to be transported and commissioned by the 30 June deadline.

The Department used its innovative contractor arrangements, including a panel of ‘ready-to-go’ specialists in remote construction, to get builders on the ground to quickly deliver eight refurbishments and 17 new homes within the challenging timeframe.

While many had thought the tight deadline too challenging, the temporary infrastructure was established on time and on 5 July, less than four months after the flood, residents of Warmun returned home to begin picking up the pieces of their shattered lives.

“The Department of Housing has mobilised in record time to commence construction.”

THE HON. DR KIM HAMES MB BS JP MLA, DEPUTY PREMIER OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA
Despite national shortages of camp accommodation, it took only ten weeks from the decision to build to having 200 residents living in the Warmun Temporary Village.
The 200-bed Warmun Temporary Village played a critical part in moving the people back to Warmun on time. It consisted of 67 three-bed self-contained units, a full commercial kitchen, two laundries, a first aid station and an ablutions block.

Managed by contractors, and overseen by the Department of Child Protection, the Village provided nutritious meals and the basic facilities needed to help people get back on their feet.

It also offered opportunities for employment and training in catering and village operations. A Warmun team was employed and trained to ensure safety and provide supervision around the Village, particularly for the many children in residence.

Now back in Warmun, the people could return to pre-flood jobs or take advantage of the work opportunities created by the rebuilding.

“\textit{It’s been a great effort by all agencies and individuals involved to get this far, and work will continue in coming months to complete the rebuilding process.}”

\textit{JEFF GOODING, CHAIRMAN WARMUN RE-ESTABLISHMENT TASKFORCE}
Steve Parry, General Manager Service Delivery, Department of Housing welcomes Nancy Nodea back to her new home.
With the first homes finished, temporary facilities in place and the Warmun Temporary Village ready for returning residents, it was time for the Gija people to go home.

On 5 July, an assortment of buses and other vehicles, loaded up with over 200 Warmun residents and belongings accumulated over almost four months in Kununurra, formed a convoy bound for home.

The sense of relief when the people returned home to Warmun was palpable. The tension and angst of the past few months in exile was replaced by a sense of belonging and homecoming, reflected in the faces of the Elders as they settled back in, and in the excitement of the kids who once again roamed their Country and re-acquainted themselves with old haunts.

Department of Housing staff worked with tenants to get them settled into their new houses, while residents of the village were treated to their first meals in their temporary home.

“When I came back it was good to be back home.” NANCY NODEA, SENIOR ELDER
Little three-year-old Bethany Drill helps with the Mantha ceremony at the Back to Warmun Day.
Tuesday 12 July was a day of joy in Warmun. Working with the Taskforce members, the Warmun Council arranged to host a celebration for the whole community, Government Ministers and the staff and contractors involved in the rebuild.

The Gija Elders provided a proper homecoming, with an emotional Mantha (traditional smoking and water blessing ceremony) to honour the spirits of the ancestors and welcome everyone back to Warmun.

With games for the kids and a ‘bush food’ lunch for some 450 guests, ‘Back to Warmun Day’ shared the pain and loss of the flood and its aftermath and celebrated the joy of returning home. It was also a day for the Warmun people to acknowledge their journey of recovery and express their gratitude for the commitment and support of the State and Commonwealth governments in rebuilding their community.

There was another reason for the Warmun kids to smile: the WA Football Commission, West Coast Eagles and Netball WA had donated sporting equipment to the community and presented it as part of the celebrations. Joining the celebrations, former West Coast Eagles star David Wirrpanda said: “The local football team, the Warmun Eagles, plays in the same colours as the West Coast Eagles, so meeting a former player was a great hit with the kids.”
Ashanti Echo is all smiles.
Deputy Premier Kim Hames received a painting by Shirley Purdie, depicting a cultural interpretation of the Warrambany.

Senior Elder Joe Thomas enjoying the homecoming.

Gordon Barney plays the didgeridoo.
Australians tend to rally to help in hard times and it did just that for Warmun. Here are just two examples of how the broader community stepped up.

A new era of Indigenous art for Warmun
Staff at the Department of Housing’s Mirrabooka Branch host a ‘casual Friday’ every week which raises money for different charities. In June 2011, they decided to help the kids of Warmun.

After discussion with community members, it was decided to use the donated money to buy art supplies for Warmun’s ‘Yellow House’ playgroup centre for 0-4 year olds.

“We wanted to do a little bit extra for the Warmun community. It would have been devastating to lose everything in the floods,” said Jeff Pitts, Manager of Business Solutions.

The Wirrpanda Foundation and the Department of Housing step up
The two organisations jointly coordinated a clothing and blanket drive for residents of Warmun for their return to their stricken town.

Businesses and organisations responded generously, donating warm clothing, including jackets, jumpers, jeans and blankets. “The majority of residents lost everything they owned in the flood. We thought it would be great to organise a drive to get them warm clothes and blankets to help make the move back a bit easier,” said Department of Housing Project Owner, Craig Dale.

Former West Coast Eagle star David Wirrpanda signs autographs for locals.
While restoration of the Warmun township was a top priority, the complexities of rebuilding a remote Aboriginal settlement almost from scratch cannot be underestimated.

The Warmun Taskforce engaged and coordinated the various agencies responsible for different parts of the rebuild, and ensured that priority was given to the essential elements that would allow the community to function once again.

The Department of Main Roads, meanwhile, had its own challenges restoring the Great Northern Highway, which had sustained significant damages at the Bow River crossing and the high-level bridge at McPhee’s Creek. Both required temporary crossings to be built, while McPhee’s Bridge had to be completely rebuilt, requiring a 12-month construction project.

Not only did damaged services infrastructure like power, water and wastewater have to be restored, but new services had to be delivered for the new houses and other facilities. Much of the new construction happened in areas outside the flood zone, where there were no existing essential services.

As is the case in many remote settlements, there was a lack of reliable maps to show exactly where services were located in the ground - with the added challenge that much infrastructure had to be built from scratch within tight timeframes.
REBUILDING WARMUN

CONSTRUCTING THE HOUSES

With so many homes to be refurbished or constructed from scratch, the Department of Housing and its building contractors knew they were facing an enormous task.

The use of dedicated project managers, combined with a ‘can-do’ attitude from the Department’s executive and management, meant that pragmatic decisions and rapid progress could be made.

In order to meet the required timeframes, significant contractor resources were brought into Warmun, and for several months more than 70 contractors were on site, working seven days a week for the period of construction.

“I’d like to acknowledge everyone involved in the rebuilding of Warmun for their terrific effort with such a high degree of professionalism.” GRAEME JONES, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR CLIENT SERVICES NORTH AND ABORIGINAL HOUSING
In addition to the 20 houses which were refurbished, 56 new two, three and four-bedroom homes were built to meet the diverse needs of the community. Two clusters of singles accommodation were also built, one for young women and another for working men.

Houses within the one-in-200 year flood zone were either raised on ‘stilts’ or built on raised earth pads to comply with the required height. These houses also had to be built to withstand the force of any future flood, including the impact of debris and objects that might possibly have been dislodged.

The outcome has been a significantly changed town layout, with some new areas of development and greater density in some existing areas.

The Department of Housing applied the best of the knowledge garnered from many years of building in Kimberley communities, which meant provision of large family living spaces and open verandahs for outdoor living.

The exteriors of the houses in Warmun homes are mostly made of modern corrugated iron - the typical Kimberley house - while interior layouts mirror conventional modern homes, with bright colours, hard-wearing floor-coverings and quality fixtures and fittings.

Responding to feedback from tenants, the Department also installed quality fences around yards to improve safety for children, provide increased privacy and encourage tenants to do garden improvements.

“Our thanks go to the Department of Housing for their strong support and commitment to our community.” KENNETH RIVERS, CHAIRMAN, WARMUN COMMUNITY COUNCIL
Life in Warmun has slowly returned to normal since the residents returned.

Tenants have been assisted to replace lost and damaged household items with flood recovery subsidies through the Department of Child Protection.

The Department of Housing has established a support service to help residents meet their tenancy responsibilities and support those who want to improve their homes and gardens.

This opportunity has been appreciated and seized upon by a number of proud householders, who have seen the new homes as a fresh start for both themselves and their community.

“The Department is doing what we can to support people in their new homes. It's been great to see some of the tenants take the opportunity to improve their homes and their gardens.”

CAROL JOHNSON, WARMUN HOUSING OFFICER, DEPARTMENT OF HOUSING
The ‘Yellow House’ is a playgroup centre for 0-4 year olds and encourages parents through training and support.
With temporary facilities in place for most services, it was time to tackle the damaged public and community facilities. The first phase included refurbishment of the community swimming pool, the Warmun Council Office, Works Depot and Women's Centre.

The next step was to build the ‘Yellow House’, a playgroup centre where young parents learned about parenting and support networks. The popular Recreation Centre, former home to Warmun youth services, was also re-built with new changerooms and kitchen.

Before and after: Warmun community swimming pool was restored by the Department of Housing.
The flood did substantial damage to the town's roads, leaving washouts and deep potholes. With new housing areas planned, new roads to reach them were also required.

The design and rebuilding of Warmun's roads became one of the last major works to be undertaken in the community. Managed by the Department of Housing, sealed roads and drainage was restored for existing roads and new roads constructed to service new housing.

The end result has been a safer, better road system with less need for constant on-going maintenance by the Warmun Council.

“The new roads have made an enormous difference... Warmun feels like a real town now.”
RALPH ADDIS, CHIEF EXECUTIVE WARMUN COMMUNITY COUNCIL
The Warmun Art Movement has its roots in the works of famous Aboriginal cultural leaders including Rover Thomas and Queenie McKenzie, George Mung Mung and Paddy Jaminji, who since the 1970s have painted using natural ochre and pigments from their Country.

Paintings are now an integral and celebratory part of the Gija culture, with artists drawing on traditional Ngaranggarni (Dreaming) stories and contemporary life for their images.

One of the most significant cultural institutions in northern Australia, Warmun Art Centre was established by leading artists in 1998 to support the integrated development of contemporary art practice by the Gija people. A key repository for Gija cultural knowledge through the recording of stories and artworks, Warmun Art Centre is also custodian of the internationally significant Warmun Community Collection.

The Collection, comprising over 400 works documenting the evolution of one of the best-known Indigenous art movements in Australia, was first used by Elders teaching at the Warmun Ngalgangpum School, and is of utmost importance to Gija people.

“Warmun art will return. The artists are saying we will start again, build it up, make it strong again.”

MAGGIE FLETCHER, MANAGER, WARMUN ART CENTRE, 15 MARCH 2011
Roseleen Park in Melbourne, working to restore and preserve vital cultural heritage.
When the floodwaters raced through Warmun Art Centre, paintings were ripped from the gallery walls and sent swirling down Turkey Creek. Over 600 art works were lost to the flood waters, while the Warmun Community Collection, fortunately stored in a separate secure space, was saved from the full force of the torrent, but not from the rising water.

Sodden and muddied, the Collection would have had an uncertain future were it not for the quick thinking of Art Centre staff. With the assistance of the nearby Argyle Diamond Mine, they arranged for the damaged Collection to be packed and flown by helicopter to Kununurra.

Staff from the University of Melbourne’s Centre for Cultural Materials Conservation (CCMC) travelled immediately to Kununurra to undertake emergency conservation work, while half the Collection was freighted to Melbourne for more extensive and sophisticated conservation. Working closely with Gija artists and restorers, the Collection was stabilised and conserved by staff and senior students at Melbourne University, with several visits by Gija Elders to advise on the conservation program over two years.

As a result of the shared learning experience through working so closely together, the University of Melbourne and Warmun Art Centre are now expanding the partnership, developing a ground-breaking tertiary education program, the ‘Gija Two-Way Learning Program’, which includes a new curriculum being developed jointly with Gija people to address the gap in intercultural education in Australia. This will offer new education opportunities for both young Gija and non-Indigenous students, while also employing Gija cultural leaders as senior lecturers in the program.

The much-anticipated return of the Collection to the township was celebrated with a traditional Joonba ceremony at the Warmun Art Centre in June 2013, and shared by many of those involved in the recovery of the Collection and of Warmun art since the flood.
For the Warmun Art Centre, the period since the flood has been not only about re-building, but also a time of reflection on what is strong about Gija culture, and a time of emerging artists, ideas and relationships, often stimulated by the transforming experiences of the flood. With remarkable resilience, the Warmun artists, some of whom are highlighted here, have rebuilt, moved ahead, and strengthened their role at the heart of Gija language, culture, and community.

Rusty Peters was born on Springvale Station, south west of Turkey Creek, where he learned traditional law and also worked as a stockman and fence welder.

After the introduction of award wages forced people off stations, he moved to Turkey Creek where he helped start the school. As part of the Gija cultural program, he took groups of boys out bush, teaching them traditional bushcraft.

His detailed knowledge of the land and stories from Springvale and neighbouring Moolabulla stations are reflected in distinctive paintings in traditional red and yellow ochres and black charcoal.

While recognisably part of the ‘Turkey Creek’ style, the intricate curves mapping the country and the dark caves and rivers in the pictures are particular to Peters’ work.
Bessie Daylight is the daughter of well-known Warmun artist Betty Carrington who, with other senior artists, taught her how to collect, grind and paint with natural ochre. Using a diverse range of colours and paints, Daylight depicts her own vision of the Ngarranggarni (Dreaming) stories of Texas Downs, as well as the living elements within this country. She is strong in culture and law, as taught by her mother, and lives in Warmun with her two children and extended family.

“The red/muddy squiggly lines represents dirty water. The top and bottom lines show houses, cars and other material things which were washed away in the flood. The figures in the middle represent us. The broken lines represent our spirits, which were broken after everything was taken away. Moving into town, living ‘on top’ of each other in a different land area, affected us emotionally, mentally and physically.”
WHY THE RECOVERY WORKED

In the story of the Warmun flood and the ongoing recovery of the community, there have been some factors that those involved have raised again and again as being key to the positive outcomes achieved. These were:

• Clear leadership and direction provided by the WA Government from the start
• Key agencies responsible were driven by the need to look after people first
• The desire to return home quickly was understood as paramount and people felt like they mattered
• The Taskforce brought agencies together around a common purpose
• The Department of Housing had the right capacity in management and contractors to respond quickly
• The communication strategy was excellent, with information disseminated quickly and accurately
• Warmun community leaders stepped up, and the Council provided effective support
• Warmun people were properly involved in the process and invited to be part of even the toughest decisions
• The community was left with a legacy of training, employment, small business opportunities and funded social programs on which to build their future.

The Warmun flood resulted not only in a greater understanding of disaster recovery operations, but also of the structure of tenures and responsibilities within an Aboriginal community. It drew together a host of different agencies, and of course the community of Warmun, all working cooperatively on every phase of the emergency from the evacuation and restoration to the final homecoming.

When nature visits disaster upon other communities, as it surely will, the knowledge gained from the East Kimberley floods in March 2011 will go a long way towards lessening the impact on those unfortunate enough to be in its path.

“I think people don’t just feel sorry for themselves from this flood. They know a lot of good stuff came from this as well, so we’re looking at the positives.” KENNETH RIVERS, WARMUN COMMUNITY CHAIRMAN
Senior Elder Nancy Nodea, happy with her new home.
WHY THE RECOVERY WORKED
THE TASKFORCE, FACILITATING THE REBUILD

The Warmun Re-establishment Taskforce brought together a range of stakeholders and key agencies to coordinate the recovery and re-building of Warmun.

Established by the Western Australian Cabinet, the Taskforce was a clear priority for the State Government. Similarly, the cooperative involvement of the former Special Minister of State, The Hon. Gary Gray AO, and the former Minister for Families, Community Services, Housing and Indigenous Affairs, The Hon. Jenny Macklin, were instrumental to the important role played by the Australian Government.

The positive and decisive response embodied in the Taskforce was, to a great extent, underpinned by the Western Australian Natural Disaster Relief and Recovery Arrangements (WANDRRA), which provided the framework for the sharing of disaster recovery costs between the State and Federal governments.

The Taskforce played a key role in facilitating claims and quickly built an understanding of how WANDRRA’s provisions apply to the unusual and complex circumstances of a remote Aboriginal community.

The greatest strength of the Taskforce was to bring together a range of agencies from across jurisdictions and to facilitate common solutions to shared challenges. This was made possible by a combination of the Taskforce Chairman’s depth of ‘local knowledge’ and relationships, and the expertise and capabilities of key Taskforce partners.
The Department of Housing played a pivotal role in the reconstruction of Warmun, quickly realising that high-level project management was crucial to a successful outcome, and establishing a separate project board and team with a clear mandate and accountability to deliver the rebuild.

Working through the project board, the Department was the ‘can-do’ agency that took the lead on the ground to re-establish the town. In just 15 months a total of 76 houses were replaced, comprising 56 new and 20 refurbished houses.

The Department also accepted responsibility for doing things they would not normally do, becoming involved in building the new roads, re-establishing water and waste water infrastructure and refurbishing the community swimming pool.

Increased skill development and providing employment for community members were priorities. Approximately 60 residents were engaged in various capacities, with up to nine residents being employed in construction over a 48-week period.

Throughout, the Department’s staff made it a priority to be in regular face-to-face communication with the Warmun community, and earned trust by not ‘over-promising’ and by always delivering on commitments.

“\nThe Department’s people have gone out of their way to make this work... they’ve become more than just another service provider, they’ve become friends to our community.\n
KENNETH RIVERS, CHAIRMAN, WARMUN COMMUNITY COUNCIL
The most important thing to note about the Warmun flood was that no human lives were lost. As events unfolded, the first priority was people, not the process. Swift action, and the fact that the flood hit during daylight hours, meant that losses were confined to buildings, possessions and infrastructure.

Of course, those losses had a profound effect on the well-being of the community, and cannot be over-estimated. While the psychological scars remain, Warmun is once again a thriving, happy community which has settled down in its new, hopefully safer, environment. The town has a different look - all in all, 24 facilities essential for a community to function have been rebuilt, 56 new houses have been constructed, a further 20 have been extensively re-furbished, temporary accommodation has come and gone, roads, water supplies and communications have been restored, a new clinic has been constructed and the school is operating as normal.

The Warmun Art Centre is also back on track, in spite of having lost much of its collection. Those pieces of art that were recovered have now been restored by The Centre for Cultural Material Conservation at the University of Melbourne.

Through the extraordinary efforts of the Department of Housing and the Taskforce, Warmun is today a stronger town. It has infrastructure that is more able to counter extreme weather events, and a community with new assets, new homes and a preserved cultural heritage.

“We've been feeling very sad about our country. But I think the water has taken all the old things away from this place and brings us to the new world, like the new kids that are growing up. We are starting again with our painting, with new colours and new people.” PATRICK MUNG MUNG, WARMUN ELDER AND PROMINENT ARTIST
Chris Clare threw body and soul into the struggle to ensure outback communities had adequate resources for their needs. This was never more apparent than during the days following the flood when, as Chief Executive Officer of the community, he provided much-needed leadership to make sure the rebuilding of the town became a priority.

Chris worked as a larrikin patrol officer with the Northern Territory Department of Aboriginal Affairs in the late 1960’s before being appointed Superintendent of the Yuendumu community on the edge of the Tanami Desert, where he learned to respect traditional Aboriginal culture. He was humbled by the power of ceremony and spiritual belief, and became a staunch advocate of “two-way learning” as a tenet of reconciliation.

He rose through senior roles in Aboriginal affairs but, yearning for the bush, went to Warmun for his last job before a planned retirement. He fell in love with the Country and the Gija people and was greatly respected for his wisdom and sincerity.

Almost a year after the Warmun flood, and with re-building well-advanced, Chris passed away following a long battle with cancer.

"That Old Man... he was the best CEO we ever had."

SHIRLEY PURDIE, FORMER CHAIRPERSON AND SENIOR ELDER

Adapted from an obituary in The West Australian, by Torrance Mendez with David Rose, 7 June 2012.
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