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Australia’s top Aboriginal organisations announced

A leading Central Australian women’s group and an up-and-coming theatre troupe from country Victoria have received top honours at the 2014 Indigenous Governance Awards.

At a gala dinner at BHP Billiton’s headquarters in Melbourne, Waltja Tjutangku Palyapayi Aboriginal Corporation from Alice Springs and Swan Hill’s The Marruk Project were awarded the best run Aboriginal organisation and project in the country by a high-calibre judging panel, including the heads of the Business Council and Productivity Commission.

Indigenous Governance Awards Chair Professor Mick Dodson said this year’s finalists not only represent the best of what is happening within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities but across Australia as a whole.

“To me it is clear, when Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are empowered to take the lead in decisions about their lives and draw on culture as a source of strength and resilience, anything is possible. The 2014 finalists are perfect examples of this.”

Reconciliation Australia, in partnership with BHP Billiton, holds the Indigenous Governance Awards biennially to identify, celebrate and promote strong Indigenous governance.

In 2014, a record 113 high-quality applications were received from a diverse range of organisations, hailing from some of Australia’s remotest communities and busiest cities.

An independent judging panel, chaired by Professor Dodson, spent four weeks touring Australia to assess the finalists against five criteria including self-determination, cultural relevance and legitimacy, future planning, and resilience.

Waltja Tjutangku Palyapayi Aboriginal Corporation was awarded Category A winner for ‘incorporated organisations’, while Girringun Aboriginal Corporation in North Queensland was highly commended.

Professor Dodson described Waltja Tjutangku Palyapayi Aboriginal Corporation as “a very well-run organisation concentrating on delivering services to families and communities”.

“Waltja is difficult to fault in its governance, it’s one of the best organisations I have encountered, the best in Australia,” Professor Dodson said.

The Marruk Project in Swan Hill, Victoria, won Category B for ‘non-incorporated projects’, with the Muntjiltjarra Wurrngumu Group from Wiluna in Western Australia a close second.

Professor Dodson said one of the unique things about Marruk is its ability to bring the whole town together.

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“It’s what we should be seeing across the world. We need things like this to co-exist, to build understanding. To actually witness it bringing the town together is something that’s almost beyond belief.”

BHP Billiton Chief Executive Officer Andrew Mackenzie said good governance promotes transparent, effective and accountable leadership.

“BHP Billiton has been proud to support the Indigenous Governance Awards since they began in 2005 and I congratulate this year’s winners.

“Good governance ensures a solid foundation for all organisations—whether government, community or business, and increases sustainable social and economic benefit,” Mr Mackenzie said.

Reconciliation Australia CEO Leah Armstrong said strong governance and the empowerment of communities are among the essential foundations of reconciliation.

“The Indigenous Governance Awards highlight the many excellent examples of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations leading the way in their communities, coming up with innovative ideas and building healthy, prosperous communities.

“Thanks to the support of BHP Billiton we have been able to share this success and the impressive achievements of our finalists with all of Australia,” Ms Armstrong said.

Full list of winner biographies attached. For further information about the Indigenous Governance Awards: www.reconciliation.org.au/iga

For interviews with the Indigenous Governance Awards winners, please contact: Melinda Ogden 0427 091 687 or melinda.ogden@reconciliation.org.au
**2014 Indigenous Governance Awards winners**

**Category A: Outstanding governance in an Indigenous incorporated organisation**

*Winner:* Waltja Tjutangku Palyapayi Aboriginal Corporation  
*Highly commended:* Girringun Aboriginal Corporation

**Waltja Tjutangku Palyapayi Aboriginal Corporation** is a pioneering initiative of the Central Australian communities’ strong women leaders. It supports communities over a 90,000 km² area to address economic disadvantage and ensure local voices are heard. It provides key services to help the community grow, including training and employment opportunities, and projects to maintain family and culture and encourage greater economic independence.

Waltja’s social enterprise investments make a real difference to people’s lives, and addresses needs that are often overlooked by government funding programs, including disability support care, emergency relief and a ‘culture car’ that can be hired by families to attend significant cultural events. Waltja highlights the important influence and leadership women have in communities and works hard to improve outcomes for families in some of the most remote areas of Australia.

Judges comment: “Culture is at the core of what Waltja does. It responds to the needs of its community by being inclusive and doing things the Waltja way.” (Emma White, Manager for Indigenous Affairs, BHP Billiton Sustainable Communities)

**Girringun Aboriginal Corporation** cares for over one million hectares of land and sea on behalf of nine Traditional Owner groups in North Queensland. Girringun’s trailblazing success is driven by the Elders’ desire to keep country, people and culture strong. Their work involves a well-established arts centre, ranger program, native plant nursery and Traditional Use of Marine Resources Agreement (TUMBRA) program.

Girringun is widely recognised for its outstanding stewardship of the land and sea rights of its members and its tireless negotiation of Australia’s first co-managed Indigenous Protected Area. They are a well-respected leader in the community and ensure everyone has an opportunity to participate in key decisions affecting their collective future.

Judge’s comment: “While culture and heritage are fundamental to its governance, Girringun has also placed itself effectively in the broader community where it contributes socially, environmentally and economically.” (Marsha Milliken, Group Manager, Employment Services, Commonwealth Department of Employment)

**Category B: Outstanding governance in an Indigenous non-incorporated project**

*Winner:* The Marruk Project  
*Highly commended:* Muntjiltjarra Wurr gumu Group

**The Marruk Project** takes a unique and exciting approach to connecting all members of its local community in the regional Victorian town of Swan Hill. It uses performing arts to strengthen culture and create opportunities for elders, young people, artists and cultural leaders to get to know each other by sharing their histories.

Through acting, puppetry, dance, live music and video, the project not only raises cross-cultural awareness but develops the skills of participating performers. The group started with Aboriginal performers and now involves non-Indigenous people from the Swan Hill community, including Afghan and Sudanese refugees.

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Marruk connects people to culture through creative productions, empowers individuals and keeps age-old dreaming stories alive.

Judge’s comment: “The Marruk Project began with a powerful vision and has expanded in extraordinary ways. It is a brilliantly unconventional project, marked by the fact that most of the program is led by inspiring young people.” (Dr Simon Longstaff, Executive Director, St James Ethics Centre)

**Muntjiltjarra Wurrngumu Group** in Wiluna, Western Australia has been designed, created and delivered with complete ownership of local Aboriginal people, giving people greater control over how external agencies and industry work with the local community.

Led and developed by the Martu people under the Wiluna Regional Partnership Agreement, the Muntjiltjarra Wurrngumu Group has established itself as an important voice at the decision making table. It is helping to break down communication barriers between the local Aboriginal community, industry and government agencies. Driver licensing, a lack of personal identification cards, schooling, racism and employment opportunities are some of the issues the group tackles on a regular basis.

Judge’s comment: “The Muntjiltjarra Wurrngumu Group’s work shows what can be achieved if we are willing to work with Indigenous people, as they too want to contribute to the wider community without giving up their cultural values.” (Eddie Cubillo, Executive Officer, National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Legal Service)