2. The Dharnya Centre: a case of institutional racism?

Dr Wayne Atkinson is an elder of the Yorta Yorta Nation. A devoted worker for his people’s continued struggle for land justice, he is a PhD graduate from LaTrobe University, and is now a Senior Lecturer and Fellow in Indigenous Studies at the University of Melbourne.

Despite having such enormous potential, and notwithstanding the fact that Indigenous tourism is identified as a growth area, the Dharnya Centre in the Barmah Forest near Echuca has had a disgracefully difficult time in getting the funding needed to reopen and to remain open.

The Centre was closed in May 2007 and declared structurally unsound because of white ant infestation – a situation that could have easily been prevented through proper maintenance and upkeep by Parks Victoria and DSE.

Institutional racism is a form of racism that occurs specifically in institutions such as government bodies, corporations and the media. It is not necessarily explicit but is perpetuated through an institution’s entrenched policies and practices that discriminate against a group or groups of people based on their race or ethnic origin, creating barriers to their political, cultural and economic advancement.

In the case of the Dharnya Centre the neglect of duty of care by Parks Victoria, and the inability of the Centre to attract enough money to rectify the pest problem when $23 million was earmarked for the development of mainstream regional tourism in the 2007 Victorian State budget (and $35 million in the 2008 budget), point to the conclusion that this is exactly what the Centre has succumbed to, whether deliberate or otherwise.

The glaring omission of Dharnya from promotional material aimed at promoting Victorian cultural tourism in interstate and international markets is another example of Indigenous exclusion.

The future of Dharnya has been under review since its closure, and it may hang on VEAC’s decision about the future of the Barmah Forest. However, the Centre has already demonstrated its ability to provide a unique experience of Victorian Indigenous culture to people from all walks of life and to contribute meaningfully to the process of reconciliation, and so it surely deserves to be reopened and developed to its full potential.

The VEAC Red Gum study should not be an impediment to or condition of Dharnya’s reconstruction. It should be a structure that exists in its own right to provide a voice for one of the longest surviving cultures in the world.

Dr Atkinson plans to raise the issue of Dharnya in the international arena when he attends the World Indigenous Peoples Summit in Japan in July this year, and is pursuing options for it to be raised as a case of discrimination before the Victorian Civil and Administrative Tribunal.

What you can do

If you would like to see the Dharnya Centre reopened you can keep pressure on the State and federal governments through contacting your local members, ministers and government departments, and writing to local and daily papers. You could also write to Premier John Brumby and ask him about what funds have been earmarked for Dharnya in his $1 billion social justice package, and in his Government’s allocation of $35 million for regional tourism in this year’s budget.