**One Mile Dam: Inside the Aboriginal community fighting to survive.**

By Aiesha Saunders and Ella Archibald-Binge

February 24, 2020

Published in *Sydney Morning Herald* and *The Age* on 24-02-2020

The community of One Mile Dam in Darwin has been home to Aboriginal people for thousands of years, but residents fear they could soon be pushed out to make way for inner-city developments.

A sacred site with deep cultural connections, it’s one of about 40 town camps across the Northern Territory which historically served as refuges for Aboriginal people, who were barred under discriminatory laws from living in urban areas until the 1970s.

In 1978, after a lengthy land rights battle, One Mile Dam was leased to the Indigenous community in perpetuity, to “provide a permanent place for Aboriginal people to stay when they come to Darwin”.

Sitting on 3 hectares of what is now prime real estate among inner-city apartment blocks, the camp is home to around 10 permanent residents and provides a safe haven for dozens of others who are homeless or visiting from remote communities. Numbers swell to up to 100 people during the wet season.

But there are concerns for the camp’s future, after the Northern Territory Labor government earmarked sections of the land for potential redevelopment for “residential and open space” in its Central Darwin Area Plan, released late last year.

Furthermore, the government’s framework to reform town camps across the Territory cites plans to “work with leaseholders to voluntarily transfer Special Purpose Leases to Crown Leases to enable the diverse use of land”.

Rosemary Timber, an advocate for the residents whose mother Mindy lives at One Mile Dam, said: “They’re trying to take the whole place.”

The lease on One Mile Dam is held by the Aboriginal Development Foundation, which is run by Bernie Valadian. Mr Valadian is non-Indigenous.

Mr Valadian said there were “meetings at the moment going on” to discuss the possibility of transferring the lease, but declined to say who was looking to take over as leaseholder or whether the NT government was involved.

A spokesman for the NT Planning Department said the government had “no plans to rezone One Mile Dam for future developments” and any planning documents referencing the site do not “mandate any specific vision” for the area.

Robert Cooper, chief executive of Larrakia Nation Aboriginal Corporation, said there were “ongoing discussions” between the Larrakia people, the foundation and the Territory government about the future of the lease.

The government said it had not received a formal request to transfer the lease.

Ms Timber, whose family has lived on the land for more than 30 years, said the community had long been under threat due to its location in a high-development area. Her father, David Timber, fought to keep the land in Aboriginal hands until his death in 2016.

Fresh fears arose late last year, when the government’s housing maintenance provider, Yilli Housing, told tenants the majority of homes at the camp would be demolished for safety reasons.

Yilli Housing chief executive Leeanne Caton said those plans had since been abandoned.

The government said it had an “open dialogue” with residents regarding the site’s future through the leaseholder. But Mr Valadian refused to say whether tenants were privy to these conversations.

**Federal Minister for Indigenous Australians Ken Wyatt said residents should have a say on any “future developments”.**

**“I encourage the Northern Territory government and the local housing provider to work closely with the One Mile Dam community to ensure residents are provided with appropriate housing,” [Ken Wyatt] said.**

Ms Timber said multiple requests for new houses and repairs had gone unanswered for decades, with the exception of her mother’s house, which was upgraded last year.

“One Mile Dam is what it is because of … inaction over many years,” she said.

“Living conditions are poor ... but this should not be a reason to remove One Mile Dam from the map and turn it into a road or government sale for some other purpose.”

Ms Caton said Yilli Housing received “limited” government funding for property management.

PHOTOS: A man known as Anthony points out where a new road was built through One Mile Dam land. One Mile Dam sits on prime real estate on the edge of Darwin's CBD.

Credit: Darrian Traynor/Getty Images

Alfred Woody (pictured) and other residents say they are not being consulted about the future of their home. Credit: Darrian Traynor/Getty Images

<https://www.smh.com.au/national/one-mile-dam-inside-the-aboriginal-community-fighting-to-survive-20200207-h1lnro.html>

PO Box 425

Maylands

WA 6931, 13 March 2020

The Minister for Indigenous Australians

Canberra

Dear Ken

Reports in the *Sydney Morning Herald* and *The Age* on 24 February 2020 quote you as saying, “I encourage the Northern Territory government and the local housing provider to work closely with the One Mile Dam community to ensure residents are provided with appropriate housing,” The article (attached) reported on concerns after the Central Darwin Area Plan, released late last year, suggested that the Aboriginal special purpose lease (SPL) at One Mile Dam (OMD) granted in 1979 would become a public park.

According to the southern press, One Mile Dam Community leader, Ms Rosemary Timber, said the community had long been under threat as the central business district spread. Her father, David Timber, had fought to keep the land in Aboriginal hands until his death in 2016.

Back in 1973, I had assisted the people camped at the site to prepare a land claim which was heard by Mr Justice Ward, the Interim Land Commissioner. Commissioner Ward recommended the land be granted but his report was not tabled in parliament before the dismissal of the Whitlam government. However, in 1978 Minister Ian Viner approved the granting of land for an Aboriginal community as Ward had recommended. In turn, on 27 March 1979, Marshal Perron, Minister for Lands in the Northern Territory government, presented the SPL to Mr Jackie Gordon, on behalf of the residents. Since then the lease has been held by the Aboriginal Development Foundation Inc. (ADF).

For at least the last 25 years, as the area around them has been developed, the residents have fought moves to evict them to make way for a public park. The ADF has also negotiated behind the people's backs to hand the SPL over to other groups. There was even a proposal to build a tourist hotel on the site, despite the residents' objections.

Now, as reported, secret negotiations are again being held.

Recently, the residents of One Mile Dam have contacted me and asked me to write to you, thanking you for your stated support and outlining their present hopes and plans.

On 13 March this year the residents held a meeting with the ADF's Bernie Valadian, the holder of the SPL, and proposed that the lease be transferred to a residents' group. Apparently Mr Valadian, who has held the OMD lease since 1979, is agreeable to this proposal. The residents are also fortunate to have acquired the services of Clancy Dane who will assist them to register their proposed association. Any such handover would require approval from the NT government. However, there are fears the NT Government is in secret talks with the Larrakia Development Foundation who have commercial plans for the area.

The resident of One Mile Dam are strongly opposed to their community being traded like a game of monopoly and beg you to intervene in support of the lease being transferred to a residents' association, which the residents are now in the process of incorporating.

Rosemary Timber and her mother Mindy Timber would love to meet you and discuss their aspirations. You may contact them through:

Clancy Dane – cdane@levittrobinson.com

Principal Solicitor – Darwin Branch, Levitt Robinson Solicitors, of Darlinghurst.

You can reply direct to Rosemary – rosemarytimber02@gmail.com or myself.

Yours sincerely

Dr William B Day

williambday1986@gmail.com

[www.drbilldayanthropologist.com](http://www.drbilldayanthropologist.com/)