

## Case study 2: Rio Tinto in Australia

### Gender considerations for cultural heritage work



Weipa  
Australia

The Community Relations team<sup>4</sup> at Rio Tinto Alcan Weipa is responsible for managing the Indigenous cultural heritage management process agreed to under the Western Cape Communities Co-Existence Agreement (WCCCA) which was signed in 2001. The management processes for Indigenous heritage specified in this agreement requires the Co-ordination Committee of the WCCCA to be notified, in advance, of the five year mine plan. The committee then nominates individuals that need to be consulted about the areas to be cleared. The nature of bauxite mining (shallow, open cut) means that there is constant need for new areas to be cleared. Approximately six months a year is spent conducting heritage surveys of these areas. In the course of this work, gender related cultural differences are taken into account to ensure that important cultural heritage sites are protected.



The Community Relations team aims to take a culturally appropriate approach to consultations with the Traditional Owners of the region and, over time, has developed an understanding of the gender context that exists in the local communities. There are many intersecting factors which the Community Relations team needs to be aware of in order to make sure gender based interests are taken into account.

It is important to avoid enforcing a gender segregation of roles, but sometimes different strategies need to be used to ensure that men's and women's views are included. The Community Relations team has noted a division of gender in the way that community members interact with the mine. Women tend to be more dominant in administrative matters, formal meetings and negotiations. For example, the

management committee of the WCCCA comprises a majority of women, who are highly involved, vocal and play a strong role. In this case, it is important to ensure that men's views are considered in the decision making processes. Special considerations may be necessary to ensure adequate engagement. Conversely, men tend to be more dominant in their own communities and at smaller, informal meetings and one on one consultations. It is generally the men that perform the on the ground clearances of sites with the Community Relations team.

Another factor for the Community Relations team to recognise is traditional "avoidance rules" that dictate whether related men and women are able to look at or talk to each other. Awareness of these rules is essential to ensure that consultation is effective. The

team is also respectful of the need for consultation to occur at times and places that are suitable to the community members. This may mean talking to women when not in the presence of men, or vice versa.

Knowing and understanding the nature of traditional Indigenous knowledge has helped the Community Relations team to recognise that consulting with only men or only women will not necessarily provide all the information needed to protect important cultural heritage sites. While some traditional knowledge is shared by both genders, there are many stories and practices that are known only to men or women. Therefore, if the team only consults with one gender, important knowledge can be overlooked. <sup>2</sup>

4. Rio Tinto Alcan Weipa's Community Relations Mutual Recognition Unit (incorporating the Heritage and Community teams)