***Yolŋu and Ngapaki: Getting the WHS balance right***

***Developing Risk Management in an Indigenous Community***

**Spoken by Rarrtjiwuy Herdman Dhimurru Chairperson**

§ (Music Playing) §

**Rarrtjiwuy Herman:**

My name is Rarrtjiwuy Herdman. I am the Chairperson of the Dhimurru Aboriginal Corporation.

Gululu dhambal ngayili.

Beautiful and rugged filled with ancient stories and song lines and a culture, thousands of years old.

In our presentation we want to tell you a bit about our Dhimurru Rangers, our country and our culture.

We want to share with you how we are making sure we stay healthy and safe as we do our djama, our work, in this remote part of Australia we call home.

The Dhimurru Aboriginal Corporation supports our Traditional Owners to manage their land and sea country.

Dhimurru the name of our organisation is the east wind that we sing about in our song cycles.

Our rangers do the day to day work of protecting and managing the Dhimurru Indigenous Protected Area. This land and sea country stretches over 550,000 hectares in the north east of Arnhem Land. We have over 300 kilometres of coast line and many off shore islands in our care.

The traditional owners established designated recreation areas for all people living in this beautiful area to enjoy. Our rangers manage these areas and also help protect our sacred sites.

Much of our work is quite similar to national and local park rangers. We do conservation work, manage feral animals and invasive pests. Jobs which can be quite dangerous.

We also use our traditional approaches like fire to burn the country in the dry season to promote flowering and harvesting. Like our ancestors we still plant grasses, tubers and scatter grains that the community later collect for their food or use in ceremonies – but we have other important roles.

We want to make sure our children and their children’s children know about their culture. Through the Learning on Country programmes we work with teachers, our elders and community, so our young people can learn our language, our song cycles, stories and how to care for country.

We know when people who know who they are, and where they belong, they will be stronger and healthier.

We respect and are guided by the wisdom of our elders.

Roy Dadaynga Marika was an important local elder and one of the founders of Dhimurru. He said to us “Be firm and strong for the land. It must be protected so that it will remain the same for all generations to come.”

Dhimurru’s governing body has elected representatives from the Yolngu clans – our board – and most of our staff are Indigenous. Here we do ‘both ways management’ so that we use both Ngapaki or non-Indigenous and Yolngu knowledge to do our work.

Our country is a long way from any major city. By road it is more than 1000 kilometres to Darwin, 3000 to Cairns and 4000 to Sydney. The only big town up here, ‘Nhulunbuy’. Nhulunbuy is the hill in the town and the ‘buy’ means from that area. There is only one road in and out prone to flooding and usually cut off for much of the wet season. You should see some of the tracks our rangers drive on – you will be pleased to learn that they all get advanced four wheel drive training to tackle these rugged roads.

For us our stories and song cycles guide us, they tell us where to find food and water and about our sacred places and duties.

I want to tell you the story of Banumbirr, the Morning Star. If you look up into the night sky at the right time you can see her. She came across the sea from Burralku, the island of the dead. As she came she named and created all the animals and the land.

At special times of the year with the help of Banumbirr and the Morning Star Pole singing and dancing from dusk to dawn we are able to speak to our ancestors living on the island of the dead.

Every part of our lives, including our work at Dhimurru is linked to our culture.

In Yolngu every animal, every plant, every person and every ranger belongs to one of two moieties, Dhuwa or Yirritja. Our moieties influence so much of our lives from what we eat to who you marry and even who you can talk to.

In 1963, bauxite mining came. It brought huge changes including the town of Nhulunbuy.

We sent bark petitions to the government signed by our elders asking they recognise us as the Traditional Land Owners. Although we did not succeed then, this was the beginnings of the land rights movement and paved the way for others. Eventually our rights were recognised. We now get royalties from the mining, some of which helps fund the work of Dhimurru.

The Dhimurru rangers ‘work’ or as we say djama, can take them to really remote places, hours inland or islands far from the mainland. Some of their work is physically hard and at times even dangerous. If something goes wrong help can be a very long way away. So up here we all take health and safety very seriously.

Our work health and safety issues register, policies and procedures are a bit different – on ours we have:

* remote work and associated safety issues
* what to do when a cyclone is approaching, and
* we have wet season protocols for when Wolma starts and there is lightening around.

But we were worried about what we might be missing. So this year we got together and talked about what we all thought were Dhimurru’s biggest work health and safety risks. Things that might kill us or mean we might need to go to hospital.

Our list had things you might see in lots of workplaces like winches chainsaws, forklifts, speeding and others which are not so usual. I’m going to talk to you about just a few of these.

Up here feral animals like gatabanga – the buffalo – and native animals like baru – the crocodile – can be a real problem. You can imagine this can be very risky for work.

Each year in the dry season the Gulf current carry a deadly cargo – ghost nets.

These nets, abandoned or lost by fisherman, drift and trap fish, turtles and dolphins. They wash up on shore or tangle themselves in the rocks or mangroves. Some are really huge and can weigh over a tonne.

First we have to find out where they are. We drive along the beaches or to get really remote coastal areas we use our sea ranger patrol boats and if we are really lucky occasionally we get to go up and search for ghost nets and trapped turtles in helicopters. That makes our day at work quite fun.

Dragging nets out of water and carting them to places to be destroyed is really challenging. The manual handling risks are serious and wading in the water to cut nets free when crocodiles and sharks can be around is something we don’t take lightly.

We always have spotters for this high risk work. Where we can, we use winches and vehicles to tow them but at some point we always need ‘people power’ and great team work.

We are proud we still have big tracts of intact ecosystems where the plant and animal communities are still healthy. We have nesting sites of threatened turtles and the snubfin dolphin. Our rangers and elders go with Australian and international scientists and help them with their research.

But up here invasive introduced species like mission grass and coffee bush can quickly get away and take over. Rangers need to spray, hand pull, chainsaw and burn them. It is hot dirty and scratchy work, good gloves long trousers and sun protection are a must.

We also work with Traditional Landowners, government and scientists to survey and to try to get rid of invasive pests like the Yellow crazy ants.

All this work uses chemicals. Everyone up here needs to know what the health risks are and how to safely mix and use them. Recently we did a complete audit of our chemicals shed. A big problem for us is the safety data sheets for herbicides and pesticides are really hard to understand and labels on many containers can be in a bad condition and have really small print. Just imagine how difficult this makes it when English isn’t your first language.

So, we looked up the safety data sheets and put hazard symbols next to all of them.

We used the Globally Harmonised System (GHS[[1]](#footnote-1)) symbols, the ones for workplace chemicals, and put information in the workshop and the office about what they all meant. Now anyone coming into our chemical shed can quickly see if something is a poison, is flammable, corrosive or might seriously harm them.

Our rangers all use two-way radios to talk to each other and the base coordinator can see via GPS on Turbotrack exactly where everyone is within our Indigenous Protected Area. This has got us out of a few tricky situations!

We think having our workers decide what the big safety risks are and then make their own safety instructions is not only a good idea it is culturally appropriate.

While we might use different words to describe it, up here we are serious about psychosocial hazards and risks. We know it can be really stressful if people are not sure what it is they are meant to do or how to do something well.

So, every morning everyone gets together for a toolbox to ‘design’ our job for the day. Over a cuppa and out on the veranda we talk about what needs to be done and if it’s a priority.

Some jobs have to be done before others or only if the weather is good like spraying weeds and going out in the boats. Then, we talk about what equipment we will need. Usually there is a quick chat about any big safety issues and any problems we have had doing those jobs before like winches getting stuck or roads being really badly eroded.

The rangers also decide who knows how to do the job, and who might need to learn and should go with them. In our culture we have rules around who can work together, people from some skin groups can’t speak to each other so they sometimes need to be allocated to another vehicle or task. Then we put it all up on the white board so everyone is clear.

All our women are led by our Senior Miyalk [female] ranger Fiona Marika and the men are led by our Senior male ranger Gathapura Mununggurr. Sometimes, if it is culturally appropriate we like to mix our teams of male and female rangers so skills are shared across the team.

I know, like my other board members and all the staff at Dhimurru that we need to manage the organisation to meet ngapaki expectations like having really good finance processes and keeping people safe but we want to do this in a way that is right for our people. So at Dhimurru we must always juggle ngapaki and Yolngu ways.

Yolngu people have three important concepts: Raypirri, Djaka and Ralpa.

Thomas Amagula is our Executive Support Officer. He decided to use these to build our own ideas for a workplace safety culture.

Roughly ‘raypirri’ means being disciplined. So we want to aim to be disciplined when we are doing our djama [work], so doing it well and safely. Making sure we are communicating clearly and respectfully with our elders; our community; with the members of the public and of course the other people at Dhimurru.

Djaka means being careful, so we decided this means looking after our own and our work mates health and safety. If we don’t know how to do something safely we will ask. And we will be really careful especially when we are doing ‘high risk work’ like hunting gatabanga - the water buffalo or catching baru.

And at work we will show Ralpa. This is about being committed and enthusiastic about our djäma, making sure we turn up for work on time, and work hard to keep our workers, community and visitors safe as we care for our country.

At Dhimurru we know, just like in all other workplaces all across Australia from Sydney to Hobart, from Perth to Nhulunbuy our safety djama is never really finished, that we all can and will do better.

So nhama yalala [goodbye and see you later] from all of us here at Dhimurru and may you all do ‘manymak’ safety djäma.

§(Music Playing)§

[End of Transcript]

1. Globally Harmonised System of Labelling Chemicals known as GHS [↑](#footnote-ref-1)