

The Guardian

We're not buying the line that fracking brings wealth and opportunities to our communities

We need our mob working arm-in-arm with non-Indigenous people across the Northern Territory to stand up against fracking. It's not safe, not trusted and not wanted

Que Nakamarra Kenny *for IndigenousX*

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There has been a lot of talk from both the Northern Territory and federal governments recently about the rivers of royalties, jobs and other benefits they claim will come from opening up the Territory to vast new shale fracking gas fields.

This has seen 83% of the Territory's landmass swallowed by shale gas exploration applications and permits from 2011 to the current day, under both Labor and Country Liberal governments.

In the same period the backlash from communities and landholders living on lands threatened by these permits has been growing rapidly as more and more information comes to light about the serious risks to land, water, air and human health from fracking. These risks are now the subject of an NT

government inquiry into hydraulic fracturing, due to report at the end of 2017.

The Meerenie and Palm Valley gas fields sit just west of my community Ntaria and on top of the Amadeus Basin, a deep and ancient underground aquifer that supplies the only drinking water supply for Alice Springs' 25,000 residents and thousands of people in surrounding remote communities.

In an arid region like Central Australia water is of critical importance to the survival of people, plants, animals and whole townships and industries like pastoralism, farming and tourism. It is estimated that, at current extraction rates, the aquifer contains just over 200 years worth of "good" water supply left.

As the fracking debate heats up in the NT the government and the gas companies like to repeat the claim that fracking has occurred "safely" in these gas fields for decades. But these claims are simply not true.

The Alice Online News quotes Dr John Childs, former NT government water controller, discussing a litany of unresolved incidents in the Meerenie, including corroded well pipes and leaking pipelines spilling oil below ground into the Amadeus aquifer, and highly saline (salty) water - a usual by-product of gas production - being kept in unlined evaporation ponds to leach back into the water table.

Childs said there was "no getting over" the fact that early wells at Mereenie had been "drilled on the cheap, with corrosion of pipes and wells likely, with the risk of contaminating our sub-surface aquifers."

The Central Land Council also gave evidence to the NT fracking inquiry recently, citing an incident at Mereenie where hyper-saline water was brought to the surface by the company unintentionally drilling into an aquifer. This water then had to

be disposed of and was taken to Lake Lewis, a nearby salt pan, and simply dumped.

They recommended that more strategic assessment of water resources is needed across NT before petroleum approvals and agreements are entered into. Too late, considering the gas rush and land acquisition is already well advanced, particularly on native title land where our people don't have the right to say no to mining access.

At our sacred Kaporilya Springs every big rain now brings this contaminated waste water flooding downstream of Mereenie. Residue from the waste can still be seen there today, and the springs, which have been there for millenia, have suddenly started to dry up in recent years.

To date there has been no information given to our communities about the impacts of decades of experimental fracking at Mereenie, but its legacy requires thorough investigation and public reporting to allow us to determine the true risk of these types of activities.

We don't know whether explosions caused by fracking underground have caused the water to divert from the Springs, because no public reporting is available, but four decades on Ntaria remains one of the most neglected communities in Australia. Any wealth extracted from our lands has been stripped away by a mining and gas industry that is over 83% foreign owned, and the drip feed of royalties to a small few in our community has created much conflict, with no overall benefit.

The image below from a cover of the 1969 edition of the Inland Review shows a napalm explosion being used on one well in Mereenie, citing the benefits that a new era of fracking technology would bring to Central Australia.



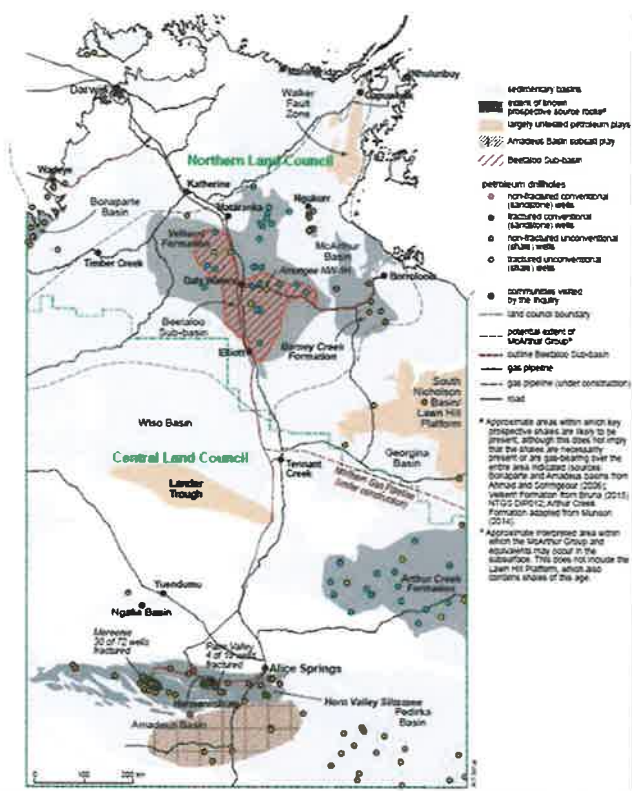
Cover of The Inland Review showing a napalm explosion used on a well in Mereenie.
Photograph: IndigenousX

Experimental gas mining and fracking has been occurring on our lands since 1967, but since then no lessons appear to have been learnt. Outlets like the NT News are calling fracking a “bonanza” opportunity and Appea, the gas industry’s peak lobby group continues to threaten that without fracking, the NT economy will simply collapse.

But is anyone else buying the line that fracking can bring wealth and opportunities to our communities?

I knew that across Central Australia attitudes against fracking are so strong that it was one of the key reasons the former-Chief Minister Adam Giles lost his CLP stronghold seat in Alice Springs. But I wanted to see what other Territory communities were saying. So, at their invitation I set out to visit and hear from them firsthand during the NT Government’s Fracking Inquiry community consultations last month.

At our first stop in Tennant Creek we saw the early construction signs of the Northern Gas Pipeline, designed to run from Tennant Creek's existing gas compression station to Mt Isa and deliver Territory gas to the East Coast and international markets. Waramunguand Wakaya Traditional Owners have criticised the consultation process leading to the pipeline's approval, reporting that the proponent Jemena and the Northern and Central Land Councils did not disclose the pipeline's reliance on new fracked gas reserves for its viability, even under direct questioning by concerned traditional owners, while simultaneously telling the business community of its aspirations to transport fracked gas.



Northern Gas Pipeline construction underway near Tennant Creek. Photograph: IndigenousX

Waramungu Traditional Owner Dianne Stokes says the groups want a guarantee from the NT Government that the pipeline will only carry existing excess conventional gas reserves, not fracked gas. While these demands were supported by the NT Labor party's 2017 conference, so far NT Energy Minister Ken Vowles has refused to act on the resolution, leaving the door open to

the risk the pipeline is a Trojan Horse for the fracking industry's expansion.

In Elliot, 250kms north, I met with Eleanor Dixon, lead singer of the band Rayella and her family at Marlinja community who had just given evidence to the Fracking Inquiry and were busy organising for an historic gathering planned for October, Kudij Karrilyi - Stand Strong for Country. The gathering is planned to reconnect families from across the region with ancient song lines that are carried through the surface and underground waterways and are under threat from plans by gas giants Origin, Santos and Pangea to open up new fracking gas fields across the region, or what the companies are calling the Beetaloo sub-Basin.

Eleanor said that if these gas fields went ahead it wouldn't just compromise the region's critical water supplies but would release huge methane gas and carbon emissions that scientists have warned would outstrip the climate damage of even Adani's controversial Carmichael mega-coal mine proposal.



Mangarrayi and Alawa traditional owners.
Photograph: IndigenousX

Further north in the Roper River region communities of Mataranka and Jilkminngan the signs of a strong fight against fracking were everywhere. The region's Mangarrayi and Alawa Traditional Owners are adamant that fracking permits granted by the Giles Government to mining magnate Gina Rinehart were issued without consultation or consent and must be scrapped.

Led by Senior Mangarrayi woman Shelia Conway, who at 85 is still a formidable spokeswoman, the group gave evidence of what they called a “dirty fracking deal” and called for Adam Giles, who is now working for Rhinehart’s Hancock Prospecting to be investigated by the new NT anti-corruption commission at a large meeting in Jilkminngan. The outpouring of defiance to the imposition of fracked gasfields across the Territory is massive and growing. It is best captured in the quote from the NT fracking inquiry’s draft report: “Overwhelmingly, the message received from the people was that fracking was not safe, was not trusted and was not wanted in the NT.”



Que Nakamarra Kenny and TC pipeline.
Photograph: IndigenousX

I saw how strong these feelings are myself as I spent the last few weeks visiting the Territory’s regional, remote and urban communities where thousands of people are turning out to call for a fracking ban. While it is important that everyone who cares for country and our water continue to make their voices heard throughout the fracking inquiry, chair justice Rachel Pepper has made it clear they will be leaving the question of whether or not to ban it up to the NT government.

But as the chief minister Michael Gunner and mines and energy minister Ken Vowles continue to erode Territorian’s faith by funding and addressing onshore gas industry conferences and refusing to meet with concerned communities, we can be certain that relying on them to make a decision in the best

interests of all Territorians is a high-risk strategy for protection of our land and water.

Instead we need a powerful movement of the people - our mob working arm-in-arm with non-Indigenous people across the Territory to stand up and speak out for nothing less than a permanent fracking ban.

Over the last two weeks in my journey I have seen the seeds of this movement everywhere. I have met hundreds of people from all walks of life standing up and working together to keep our land and water safe for the next generation. I have seen young mob finding their feet and their voice to speak out to protect country, guided by our elders.

The strength of this movement is its powerful vision for a united Territory; one in which none of our communities are neglected, none of our people are forced to make a toxic trade-off for essential services by making bad deals with fracking and fossil fuel companies, and our natural resources are shared and preserved for the future.

By comparison, the gas companies have nothing to offer our communities. This is why I'm part of the fight, and this is why we will win.

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