

Indigenous stockmen return to fold

By Sara Everingham for AM

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A new program is bringing Indigenous people back to the Northern Territory cattle industry after a pay dispute 43 years ago sparked a drastic fall in numbers.

Indigenous people were once the backbone of the industry in the Territory, but their numbers dropped markedly after the Wave Hill walk-off in 1966 when Vincent Lingiari and other Indigenous stockmen made a stand for equal wages.

New efforts are now being made to boost the number of Indigenous people working and running cattle stations, with 12 trainees recently graduating from a pastoral program at Waliburru Station, 500 kilometres south-east of Darwin.

The trainees are from the nearby community of Miniyeri, and their training is being run by the Indigenous Land Corporation (ILC), which was set up by the Commonwealth to boost economic development on Aboriginal land.

ILC general manager David Galvin says the program is about more than just finding Aboriginal people work.

"I think we're celebrating trainees graduating through various certificates in agriculture specialising in beef production, but we're also celebrating a revival of a tradition of cattle work, cattle stations and culture that Aboriginal people have been with for over 100 years," he said.

The \$4 million program at Waliburru Station is just one of many attempts to bring the numbers back up, and Mr Galvin hopes that in nine years' time traditional owners will not just be working on the station, but taking the reins themselves.

"You've got a culture, people who haven't worked for a number of years and young people coming up who haven't seen their fathers and their grandfathers working," he said.

"But I think that's been overcome here. The people have been fully engaged."

Harold O'Keefe is one of the Waliburru Station trainees and says he wants to follow in the footsteps of his stockman father.

"[There are] lots of things to do [and it] keeps my life busy. I don't know, just keeping me fit all the time, just working," he said.



Trainee Harold O'Keefe says he wants to follow in the footsteps of his stockman father. (ABC News: Sara Everingham)

- [Map: Darwin 0800](#)

Northern Territory Cattlemen's Association member Luke Bowen says poor education is an impediment, but says Indigenous employment must be increased in the Northern Territory.

"The Indigenous population in the Northern Territory is roughly 30 per cent. It's a very young and very fertile population and potentially in 20 or 30 years it will be 50 per cent of the Northern Territory's population," he said.

"So we need to collectively improve the circumstance here now, otherwise some of the negative aspects that we see now will be accentuated in the future."

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