

Investment opportunity for bush tomato entrepreneurs

The Desert Knowledge Cooperative Research Centre (CRC) is calling for private investors to partner with remote Aboriginal communities in an innovative business development.

CRC Managing Director Jan Ferguson cites Titjikala, a remote community that operates the successful Gunya Tourism joint venture, as a successful example of such a partnership, and adds that there are many similar commercial opportunities in desert areas awaiting business investment.

‘What communities need is for financial backers to embrace these opportunities, and investors need a tax break,’ she says.

One such opportunity is with bush tomatoes – the main ingredient in a wide range of chutneys, sauces and spice mixes that are for sale in supermarkets and delis around the country and, increasingly, overseas.

The Desert Knowledge CRC

is conducting a large-scale horticulture research trial with bush tomatoes to find out if the distinctive desert fruit, which Aboriginal people currently gather straight from the bush, can be grown commercially in desert Australia.

The trial will generate knowledge about costs and commercial returns of bush tomatoes and help determine which production systems and propagation techniques would work best in the desert.

‘This research shoulders the risks associated with growing this fruit commercially in the desert. We are taking on these risks so future growers won’t have to,’ says Ferguson.

The Northern Territory Department of Primary Industry, Fisheries and Mines has provided support for the research trial, and horticulture specialists from the Alice Springs Desert Park are also contributing.

‘One thing our research



Desert Knowledge CRC

and Gunya’s example clearly shows, is that enterprises in remote Aboriginal communities succeed if they respect peoples’ culture and fit in with their way of life,’ says Ferguson.

Ferguson says the CRC researchers have worked closely with Aboriginal women, who traditionally harvest the bush tomatoes. She says they are interested in promoting the cultural side of the fruit to let consumers know where they come from.

More information:
Desert Knowledge CRC,
www.desertknowledgecrc.com.au

Guidelines for groundwater health

A University of Technology Sydney scientist is developing guidelines for assessing the health of groundwater ecosystems. Dr Grant Hose says that current water quality guidelines do not take into account the chemical and fuel spills and seepage that contaminate aquifers and kill microbes and invertebrates. While his research is based in NSW, Hose says the outcomes will have national implications.

‘The life that inhabits [groundwaters] is very different from that of surface waters,’ says Hose. ‘Yet it plays a vital role, for example, in breaking down organic pollutants and making the water safe to drink. That’s a service we don’t want to lose.’

CRC CARE Managing Director Professor Ravi Naidu says groundwater is often the mechanism by which toxic contaminants can reach humans – an example being the current arsenic crisis in Bangladesh. (See www.crcare.com)

Engineers Without Borders making a difference

In 2002, a group of young Melbourne engineers – interested in doing volunteer work for disadvantaged communities, but finding no ready outlet for using their vocational skills – got together to form Engineers Without Borders (EWB) Australia.

The mission of Engineers Without Borders is to help communities overcome quality-of-life problems caused by poverty and injustice through practical and sustainable engineering solutions.

For example, this year EWB volunteer and environmental engineer Brad Hiller spent four months working with the villagers of Humla, in the remote Nepalese Himalaya, to equip the village with its own solar energy supply.

‘We have the technology that can treat



Brad Hiller with his Nepalese counterpart assisting with the Humla solar power installation. EWB/Brad Hiller

water to make it safe, manage waste so it doesn’t pollute and generate renewable energy so it doesn’t harm the earth,’ says

President of EWB’s WA chapter, Kim Axworthy. ‘EWB’s aim is to make sure that these technologies are accessible to all.’

The national group now has over 3000 members, places around 30 people in overseas projects each year and is also involved in partnerships with indigenous, refugee and other communities in Australia.

EWB volunteers only work on projects at the invitation of local people. They offer technical expertise and assist with construction and other on-ground work. Financial support for EWB is generated from fundraising and corporate sponsorship.

More information:
Engineers Without Borders, www.ewb.org.au