

Planes, Roads, Automobiles: The Realities of Life on NE Arnhem Homelands

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This is a draft paper that will be continually updated with new information as it comes to hand.

Summary. Mata Mata is a Yolŋu homeland in North East Arnhem Land, founded by Gattirri Burarrwaŋa and family around 1948 and supported by Marthakal Homelands & Resource Centre. It has no working vehicle. Homelands have a strong health record, but homeland programs do not fund a transport system, and private vehicles are a gap that families fill themselves. This main paper traces the Mata Mata fleet car by car from 2015 and describes the Djotarra 2 campaign. Companion papers to Planes, Roads, Automobiles treat Planes (Bäpa Sheppy, MAF and fares), Roads (the Central Arnhem Highway), and Royalties (where Gove mining money went). Appendices A and B address the “forty billion dollars” claim. The ISX’s role is micro-work: to pinpoint the vehicle gap and show how inadequate government funding and royalties leave families and supporters carrying it.

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1. The argument

It is often said that forty billion dollars a year is spent on Aboriginal Australia. The figure is used by those who wish to denigrate the work going on in Aboriginal communities and to close down any separate Aboriginal budget; Pauline Hanson and One Nation, for example, have cited it as a large waste of public money. This paper answers with one small, countable part of homeland life at Mata Mata: what it has cost families and their supporters to keep a vehicle running, car by car and dollar by dollar. The homeland itself was built by its families over seventy years. The paper also asks the quieter question behind that figure: if policy pushes homeland people toward towns, why must they keep buying, repairing and replacing the vehicles that make homeland living possible?

The annual figure is a Productivity Commission estimate for 2015-16 of \$33.4 billion, about \$39.5 billion after inflation adjustment by the Institute of Public Affairs. As Appendix A shows, only about \$6 billion a year of it was, as it is now, Indigenous-specific spending designed for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Appendix B counts what a vehicle costs one homeland, and who pays.

Homeland living has a health record, but homeland programs do not fund a transport system, and the vehicle is the hinge on which everyday mobility turns. Without one, a grocery run is a 400-kilometre round trip, and clinic and town trips depend on planes, boats, lifts and the visiting services Marthakal provides. Homelands are a sacred endowment, not merely a legal entitlement; land rights without the means to move on country leave families carrying costs that no program names.

2. The homelands movement and who runs the homelands

Homelands were made by Yolŋu families with the elders' authority. They are not things government or outside supporters make. The desire to live on country preceded policy: as Morphy and Morphy put it of Baniyala, the Whitlam years "provided the opportunity to act decisively on the desire to move back to country; [they] did not create that desire." Mata Mata pre-dated the 1970s movement. It was created by Gatiŋri Burarrwaŋa and his family in or around 1948 on country entrusted to him; a marine landing and bush runway were cut by hand from the mangroves. Nearby Gi'kal and Nyinyikay followed. Harold and Ella Shepherdson helped elders such as Gatiŋri create the beginnings of what came to be seen as the homeland movement.¹

A homeland, on the definition used here from the 1970s movement, is where families live on their ancestral custodial land, elders have authority to make decisions, and families have struggled against pressure to centralise because they have a future on their land. Homelands are "a sacred endowment not a legal entitlement in the sense of land title." Living on a homeland is an exercise in self-reliance against withdrawn support, far from a "lifestyle choice."¹

Around the 1970s leaders — including M. and G. Yunupingu, G. Djerrkurra, W. Lanhupuy, D. Marawili and Narritjin Maymuru — supported homelands organisations. Laynhapuy Homelands Aboriginal Corporation (from 1985) and Marthakal Homelands & Resource Centre Aboriginal Corporation (from 1986) raised funding and capital for infrastructure, including for a time from kava licensing. In 2017 Laynhapuy had income of about \$17 million. Marthakal, based at Galiwin'ku and directed by a Mala of senior clan

representatives, has supported about 29–30 foundational homelands with health, municipal and essential services, rangers, arts and an airline. Mata Mata is a Marthakal homeland (NT Place Names Register). Laynhapuy's current public list of homelands does not include Mata Mata.¹

Policy pressure has been severe: the 2008 transfer of homeland municipal services to the Territory with no increase in funds; the Intervention, the kava ban and the end of CDEP; and a reported 38 per cent real cut to the NT Homelands Program between 2016 and 2023. Through those changes the organisations and families kept the homelands going.¹

The Indigenous Stock Exchange (ISX) has focused on North East Arnhem Land since about 2008 and has supported Mata Mata since 2012, at the direction and with the cooperation of the community and elders. Its work here is micro: to pinpoint gaps such as the homeland vehicle, raise small targeted funds, and show how inadequate government funding and royalties leave families carrying essential costs. The ISX does not run Mata Mata; Marthakal and the families do.¹

This paper does not describe how Mata Mata works as a homeland. That is the work of its families — including the Burarrwaja, Gurruwiwi and Garawirrtja families — and of Marthakal. It concerns one gap that homeland programs do not fund: the vehicle.

3. What the research shows about homelands

The health evidence is strong. In a seven-year study of 826 Aboriginal adults in central Australia, McDermott, O'Dea, Rowley and colleagues found homeland residents less likely to die (relative risk 0.56) or to be admitted to hospital (0.79), with lower rates of diabetes (0.77), hypertension (0.66) and overweight (0.70). Mean age at death was 58 on homelands, against 48 in centralised communities.²

Utopia has sixteen outstations over 10,000 square kilometres and no centralised settlement. A ten-year follow-up found all-cause mortality about 40 per cent below the Northern Territory Indigenous average (standardised mortality ratio 0.62), lower cardiovascular mortality (0.52), and cardiovascular hospitalisation of 13 per 1,000 against 33 per 1,000. The researchers attributed this to physical activity, diet, limited alcohol, and connectedness to culture, family and land.³

Among 298 adults in an Arnhem Land community, Burgess and colleagues found that an interquartile rise in a caring-for-country score (covering burning, gathering food and medicine, ceremony, protecting sacred areas and producing artwork) was associated with lower body mass, abdominal obesity, blood pressure, diabetes and psychological distress, and better HDL cholesterol.⁴ The Australian Human Rights Commission's 2008 outstations discussion paper accepted that homelands offer a healthy alternative to the problems of larger regional centres.⁵ Morice (1976) and Senior, Chenhall, Hall and Daniels (2018) reach the same conclusion from another angle: a homeland is a place to be in control of one's life, and a refuge from the larger community.⁶

Homelands also offer space: open country, distance from the crime and violence concentrated in towns, and income from hunting. Altman's Arnhem Land work treats hunting not as a lifestyle choice but as part of a hybrid economy that creates economic, social and ecological value, a point former Northern Land Council chief executive Kim Hill has also made publicly. Homelands contribute to health and wellbeing, and often to an art and craft industry that is the only economic base available.

This research does not capture ceremony. People on homelands are likely to take part in ceremonies of immense antiquity, which create a connection to land and sea that most non-Aboriginal people are unlikely to perceive. Preparing them is intense work that demands physical endurance and brings mental satisfaction, and the associated dance and song are unique in the world.

4. What the research shows about vehicles

Altman and Hinkson, writing on the social universe of Kuninjku trucks, argue that vehicles carry people across customary lands and to the clinic, ceremony, the art market and town: “Arguably, trucks saved the Kuninjku community.” People are reluctant to live at an outstation without a vehicle, and when a repair takes months they end up living in Maningrida.⁷

Vehicle numbers are strikingly low. Gerrard found roughly sixty working vehicles for about 800 people in Maningrida in the late 1980s, and one Aboriginal-owned car for every forty-four Aboriginal people. In 2005 Altman and Hinkson found one truck or four-wheel drive for up to thirty Kuninjku people, and a community of 300 sharing ten to twenty working vehicles. Stotz recorded a Tanami Desert family of fifty sharing one Land Cruiser and a tractor.⁸ At Donydji (Experiments in Self-Determination) there were thirteen dead vehicles at the outstation and about as many again at the rubbish dump; a bush taxi to Nhulunbuy cost \$950 return; abandoned vehicles were stripped by the roadside, and police confiscated unroadworthy ones.⁹

Nationally, Spandonide found that remote Aboriginal people have on average ten times fewer vehicles per person than other remote Australians. The fleet is old and unsuited to the conditions, and a vehicle lasts on average six months to two and a half years. Half these communities have no public or air transport. Without a car, transport costs \$4,000 to \$7,000 a year more in remote Australia than elsewhere, and in very remote communities total transport costs reach 60 to 80 per cent of median annual income.¹⁰

The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare reports motor vehicle access for First Nations people aged fifteen and over of 75 per cent nationally, 66 per cent in the Northern Territory, and 72 per cent in remote areas against 93 per cent for non-Indigenous people. NATSISS figures put access to a vehicle to drive at 44.2 per cent in remote areas, and ethnographic work suggests 5 to 10 per cent in some places.¹¹

The Desert Knowledge CRC viability analysis found very high numbers of unregistered cars, and of people per vehicle, around Alice Springs, and an Indigenous land-transport death rate about four times the non-Indigenous rate.¹¹ That finding reflects an under-resourced, unregistered fleet, not homeland living; the full argument is in the companion Roads paper.

Policy has pushed the same way. The 1987 Blanchard report, *Return to Country*, identified 588 homeland centres with about 9,500 people and treated them as permanent.¹² By the mid-1990s the mood had turned. Under the 2007 memorandum of understanding, municipal and essential services for about 500 Northern Territory homelands passed to the Territory for about \$20 million a year. SIHIP, the Intervention’s \$647 million housing program for more than 750 houses across 73 communities, explicitly excluded homelands. Stronger Futures ended with the Territory taking on municipal responsibility for a one-off payment of \$155 million. COAG’s Closing the Gap effort focused on 29 priority communities, leaving nearly 1,000 homeland communities outside the frame. In later work, Altman describes the result as a policy that undermines living in the smallest and most remote places, home to about 20,000 people in about 1,000 communities across half the continent.¹³

5. The Mata Mata story

5.1 The homeland

Mata Mata is a Yolŋu homeland in East Arnhem Land, in the Northern Territory electorate of Mulka, and a Marthakal homeland. Gaypalani is its djungaya, or strong leader. In 2026 the homeland is going through a renaissance, with many people returning home to honour Terry Mirrara Burarrwanga. It has no vehicle.

Up to two or three hundred people may live there at once, with perhaps one working vehicle, often borrowed. There is always a car in a workshop, taking six to twelve months to fix; people rely on planes, hitching and fundraising for the next repair.¹⁴



Figure 1. Front wheel removed, hub exposed, in a workshop, Mata Mata, October 2026. Photo: Peter Botsman.



Figure 2. Engine bay of a stripped Land Cruiser, Mata Mata, October 2026. Photo: Peter Botsman.

A grocery run is a 400-kilometre round trip to Nhulunbuy. Packaged groceries produce large quantities of cans and plastic, and there is no garbage collection: the community keeps the grass low against sandflies, sorts cans, bottles and plastic, and buries the rubbish in a large pit behind the settlement.¹⁴

5.2 The Central Arnhem Highway in brief

The Central Arnhem Highway, officially the Central Arnhem Road, is the only road into East Arnhem Land that is meant to work all year. It runs about 645 kilometres from the Stuart Highway south of Katherine to Nhulunbuy, and more than 85 per cent of it is unsealed. The western road through Cahills Crossing closes for the whole wet season; the Central Arnhem Highway is passable in principle but very hard going in the wet, with heavy-vehicle restrictions, washouts and bogging, and closures at the extreme, officially about nine days a year. In 2025 flooded roads and airstrips cut about 500 Laynhapuy homeland residents off from fuel, food and healthcare. On 27 September 2026 the author counted 30 wrecks along the road, against a personal record of 150. In October 2022, on the account in Grand Final Night at Conway Station, an HJ60 lost seven tyres between Nhulunbuy and Mainoru on this road.

The road falls between the cracks. The Territory owns it and spends about \$2 million a year maintaining it; the Commonwealth funds capital in time-limited packages; fuel excise is not returned to roads, and the Territory's tax base is small; councils maintain community access roads from small untied grants; and homeland roads, such as Laynhapuy's 540 kilometres, depend on Territory grants. The last kilometres decide access: Gapuwiyak's 30-kilometre council road, Ramingining's dry-season-only roads, Bulman's creek crossings, Bäniyala's air food drops in the wet, the track to Donydji, and about 79 kilometres of bush track to Mata Mata that is often severely damaged each year in the wet.

A A\$355 million upgrade (\$280 million Commonwealth, \$75 million Territory) was assembled from 2018. A 2019 announcement promised to seal about half the road; by October 2026 about 25 kilometres of new seal, about 4 per cent, was complete, and a further 17.65 kilometres was under construction after its start slipped four times. Sealing the rest would cost roughly \$1.2 billion to \$1.5 billion at current contract rates,

an estimate rather than a government figure. Rough gravel adds about 44 per cent to a four-wheel drive's running costs, and in March 2026 diesel cost \$3.28 a litre at Gapuwiyak against \$1.81 in Darwin.

The full analysis is in the companion Roads paper: Roads: The Central Arnhem Highway — the road that falls between the cracks. That paper covers funding gaps, the Cahills Crossing contrast, bridges and seal, branch roads including the track to Mata Mata, and representation in Mulka.¹⁵

5.3 Pooling, and the pressure on owners

Mrs Burarrwanga's model for groceries was pooling: in the wet season, when vehicles cannot cross the creeks and rivers, Centrelink accounts were pooled so that the community could charter a flight, buy food and share it out.¹⁶ That experience suggests one option for transport: a pooled vehicle fund with a service budget and a fuel budget, so that the car is maintained as shared infrastructure. Whether to adopt it, and who holds the car, is for Gaypalani, the senior family members and Marthakal to decide. Experience shows that new cars are not the answer; the practical strategy favoured by the family and supporters is to buy old 60, 70 and 80 series Toyotas and run them on those budgets.

When a homeland has one vehicle, it tends to become the community's vehicle whether the owner likes it or not. Ownership then brings not the usual borrowing and saving capacity but constant pressure to lend, drive and repair. Ethnographic work on Kuninjku trucks and on jealousy around vehicles records related pressures elsewhere. Banks and lenders seeking a vehicle market here must start from that fact, not from a suburban loan.



Figure 3. Troop Carrier left on a bush track, Mata Mata, October 2026. Photo: Peter Botsman.

6. The cars since 2015

Since 2015 the families have bought or been given several vehicles with supporters' help. By late 2017 three Land Cruisers were "serving the community for shopping and other logistical needs". The budgets, a

May 2018 maintenance list and later records show the pattern: cheap old vehicles, bought and repaired a year at a time with no maintenance budget, end up off the road.

6.1 The budgets, 2015 to 2017

In 2015 a Toyota Land Cruiser, the Yothu Yindi Spirit, was bought for \$1,500. Registering, servicing and driving it north cost far more than the car.

Item (2015)	Cost	Note
Toyota Land Cruiser	\$1,500	Purchase price
Roof rack	\$200	
Eastgate Autoelectrical	\$118.25	
Service, including front-end bushes	\$2,161.93	
Registration and insurance	\$477	Three months, Jervis Bay
Northern Territory registration	\$493.50	Six months
Battery	\$300	Bought in Dubbo
Tyrepower Gove	\$450	
Diesel, Nowra to Katherine	\$867	
Diesel around Gove and Gapuwuyak	\$157	
Signage	—	Donated by Bob
Total, car and fuel	\$6,567.19	Subtotal as given in the budget

The car was less than a quarter of the total; parts, servicing, registration and fuel cost more than three times its price again (worked out here). The Yothu Yindi Spirit lasted about three years and was highly effective, often seen around Nhulunbuy. It looked rough but was reliable, and it was carefully supervised by the then djungaya of Mata Mata, Mrs Burarrwanga.

In 2016, the year of the Yolŋu Road walk, another Land Cruiser was bought for \$10,000. John walked to buy a car for the community, Brigitte for the revival of the Mata Mata school and Michael for cross-cultural journeys to school; a Pozible campaign went up that night. With \$3,500 for repairs and safety work and \$1,500 for registration, the car cost \$15,000 on the road. Diesel and fuel came to \$5,100, a large part of it for driving the car from Sydney to Arnhem Land. The 2017/18 budget put \$16,140 into cars and transport, its largest line, in \$36,940 of planned spending against expected income of \$15,800, with the stated priority of “a stronger transport infrastructure at Mata Mata”. As observed at the time, without a car the trip to Elcho Island or Gove cost about \$650 each way; bush taxis often would not go to Mata Mata and charged a similar amount.¹⁷

6.2 The fleet in May 2018

By May 2018 the cars had become a list of repairs. A maintenance on 15 May 2018 recorded six vehicles, four under Batumbil’s name.

Vehicle	Model and year	Condition in May 2018
Djotarra	Land Cruiser 80 Series, built October 1996	On blocks in the shed. Needs brake pads, rotors and a clutch plate
Yothu Yindi Spirit	Land Cruiser, 1990	No comment recorded
Old Man Walking Stick	Land Cruiser Troopy, 12/97	Sat in the weather for five years or more. Needed new tyres and more
Dhamilingu	Land Cruiser purchased in Cairns	Front wheel shaft; possibly the starter motor

Winnikamu	Land Cruiser 80 Series	A beautiful old car, odometer 338,269 when first delivered. Needs the starter motor replaced or reconditioned, brakes, battery housing, and the front bumper rewelded
Terence Gurruwiwi's Navara	Nissan Navara utility (year not clear on the list)	No comment recorded

The covering email noted that a small Kia was missing from the list. An attempt to drive a Kia sedan into the community ended with the car submerged in a creek, beyond repair. Engine numbers and VINs, given on the original, are omitted.¹⁸

Of the four vehicles with comments, one was on blocks, one had sat in the weather for five years or more, and all needed parts or repairs before they could be relied on. The budgets show supporters' money raised a year at a time to buy cars, make them roadworthy and fuel them, but no fund for servicing or later repairs. Buying the car is the easy part, which is why Djotarra 2 comes with fuel and mechanic accounts (section 7) and section 5.3 argues for a pooled fund with a service budget.



Figure 4. Land Cruiser wagon with broken rear window, Mata Mata, October 2026. Photo: Peter Botsman.



Figure 5. Stripped Troop Carrier body, Mata Mata, October 2026. Photo: Peter Botsman.

6.3 After 2018: the record so far

The record after 2018 is incomplete; what is documented follows.¹⁹

- 3 February 2019: \$9,250 from the ISX funded four small emergency payments to community members (\$750 in total) and \$1,106.30 to Gove Toyota Motor Parts. Lynne Walker paid for a radiator for Dhamilingu, and Graham, a long term supporter and mentor of Mrs Burarrwanga paid for phone and internet indefinitely. Dhamilingu's registration and mechanical repairs were still outstanding.
- 18 November 2022: a Troopy was registered for Mata Mata, mainly for the dirt roads between Mata Mata and Nyinykay and occasional trips to Nhulunbuy and Yirrkala.
- 6 November 2023: "A new car arrived at Mata Mata": a Land Cruiser Troopy bought in Sydney and brought to Arnhem Land via Milingimbi. The troopy did not last more than six months because of a failure to check on water and oil.
- 2026: the Djotarra 2 campaign (section 6).

No full total across all cars and maintenance can yet be given. Recorded spending on cars and fuel in 2015 and 2016 comes to about \$26,700, and the 2017/18 budget planned another \$16,140 (worked out here); costs after 2018 are only partly recorded. Completing the count is the next piece of work; Appendix B sets out what can be said now.



Figure 6. Row of rusted, burnt-out car bodies, Mata Mata, October 2026. Photo: Peter Botsman.



Figure 7. Burnt-out car body beside a shed, Mata Mata, October 2026. Photo: Peter Botsman.

7. Djotarra 2

Cars do not last long in Arnhem Land; about two years is the life of a vehicle. All Mata Mata's cars are named. Djotarra was a very significant Gumatj ancestral hero, a woman also known as Bayini. The first Djotarra, an old white Toyota Land Cruiser 80 series, was a very special car for the family, owned first by Don Burarrwanga and then, in the early 2000s, by Batumbil Burarrwanga.



Figure 8. Land Cruiser marked “Djotarra” in a shed, Mata Mata, October 2026. Photo: Peter Botsman.

Reviving Djotarra, or another old Land Cruiser at Mata Mata, was considered. Djotarra was already on blocks in May 2018 (section 6.2). The engine ran some years ago, but the vehicle has no gearbox or tyres and needs front wheel bearings, so repair is no longer workable. Getting it to town would cost three or four thousand dollars before a gearbox and other major parts, and costs would soon reach about twenty thousand dollars for an older car almost certain to have something else wrong with it. The revival estimate of 1 October 2026 shows why.²⁰

Item	Estimate	Note
Four all-terrain tyres	\$720 to \$1,500	Shop prices, usual 80 series size; fitting in Gove not included
Second-hand gearbox	\$1,500 to \$2,000	About \$4,000 if it has to be rebuilt
Freight of the gearbox to Gove	\$1,500	Estimate, not a quote
Pickup and delivery, Mata Mata to Gove and back	\$7,000	Estimate; Mata Mata is about two hours' drive from Nhulunbuy
Mechanical repairs	\$10,000	Estimate for workshop labour and small parts
Running total	\$20,720 to \$22,000	

The cheaper and better option is a car from the southeast, even one with flaws: an old 60, 70 or 80 series Toyota (section 6.3), for which spare parts are available locally, which people know how to fix, and which survives the rough roads as well as anything will. This car will be Djotarra 2, a homeland vehicle rather than a private one, and Gaypalani will do what he can to keep it maintained for as long as possible. Supporters have already started giving.

The target is around \$20,000 to \$22,000. The ISX contribution page sets out what each donation does: \$500 for spare parts; \$2,000 for fuel to deliver the car to Arnhem Land; \$5,000 for two months' running costs;

\$10,000 for workshop repairs; and \$22,000 for the whole car. Gifts of \$50, \$100 or any amount are gratefully received.

Djotarra 2 is meant to keep running. The campaign will open a fuel account at Nhulunbuy BP and an account with a local Nhulunbuy mechanic for regular servicing. The car will also support a new family business gathering nanka bakarra (Kakadu plum) and processing it on the homeland for sale to health food shops in the southeast and elsewhere. That income will help, though it will not make cars sustainable. The blue shed where Djotarra 1 has sat for many years will be the hub for the business, and for arts and crafts.

Donate to Djotarra 2: <https://www.isx.org.au/civCRM/contribute/transact?reset=1&id=18>

8. Planes (companion paper)

When there is no car, planes are the fallback — at far greater cost. By the community's account the flying nurse comes to Mata Mata on MAF about once every three weeks; as a Marthakal homeland the visiting team may be Marthakal Homelands Health Service.²¹ The full treatment — Bäpa Sheppy's airstrips and the hand-cut Mata Mata runway, MAF's history and the 1973 handover, who actually pays for MAF, fares against homeland incomes, and funeral travel in Bunguldjama — is in the companion Planes paper.

9 Bush Taxis

Bush taxis are another vexed subject which we will endeavour to research. They are a lower cost than planes but they bring with them contraband goods into the community. After many years of working in these communities the author has no problem with controlled use of kava. What is a problem is that unlike in the mission times, none of the income or revenue from the sales of kava stay in the community. Bush taxis tend to capture the kava revenue with no benefits at all to the remote communities.

10. What the community has asked for, and how supporters can help

Djotarra 2 is the immediate ask from Gaypalani and the family. Supporters can help with:

- Promotion of the homeland transport campaigns through emails, magazines and other media.
- Approaches to Toyota and other car organisations that might help with homeland cars
- Discussions with banks that understand the setting, if the family and Marthakal want help for people to buy their own cars.
- A fuel account at Nhulunbuy BP and an account with a local Nhulunbuy mechanic for regular servicing, as the family has requested — after checking what vehicle and workshop services Marthakal already runs.

Together with a pooled vehicle fund if the family and Marthakal adopt one (section 5.3), these steps treat the homeland vehicle as shared infrastructure for health, culture and economic life.

10. Scope

This is the main paper of the set. It concerns the homeland vehicle: the fleet since 2015, the costs, the Djotarra 2 campaign and the policy context. Planes, Roads and Royalties are separate companion papers. The cost of the author's own travel to Arnhem Land is kept separate. The paper is a standing document, housed on workingpapers.com.au and linked from the ISX Mata Mata Transport campaign page.

Notes

1. Botsman (2019), Mata Mata Creative Trust prospectus, pp.6–8 (homeland definition; Gattirri Burarrwaja c. 1948; 1970s leaders; Laynhapuy and Marthakal). Botsman (2015), "When the World Turns Upside Down," p.3 (self-reliance, not lifestyle choice). Morphy & Morphy, in Peterson and Myers (eds), *Experiments in Self-Determination*, ch.15 (desire to live on country preceded policy). NT Place Names Register id 529 (Matamata; resource centre Marthakal). Marthakal Homelands & Resource Centre Aboriginal Corporation, ORIC ICN 8274; archived marthakal.org (2012–13, 2025). Grealy (Menzies) HHIP M&E Final Report, Sept 2025 (NT Homelands Program; 38% real cut 2016–2023 cited via AHNT). Kerins (2009), CAEPR Topical Issue 09/2009 (2008 transfer). ISX about page; Creative Trust p.43 (ISX at Mata Mata since 2012).
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12. House of Representatives Standing Committee on Aboriginal Affairs (1987), *Return to Country* (the Blanchard Report).

13. 2007 memorandum of understanding on homeland services; Northern Territory Emergency Response and SIHIP; Stronger Futures, \$3.4 billion over ten years, and the 2015 \$155 million one-off payment. Altman (2006), CAEPR Working Paper 34; Altman (2018), Oceania; Altman, Crikey, 2011, on the 29 priority communities.
14. Peter Botsman, email to Peter Garrett, 3 October 2026: firsthand account of a week at Mata Mata (no cars operating; 400 km round trip to Nhulunbuy; no garbage collection).
15. Botsman (2026), Roads: The Central Arnhem Highway (companion paper in this set), sections 3–9, which give the full sources: DLI, Central Arnhem Road upgrades; Developing East Arnhem; Visit East Arnhem; West Arnhem Regional Council; ABC News, 1 May 2025 and 4 March 2026; NT Tenders Online; Katherine Times (2019) [snippet]; ATAP vehicle operating cost models (44 per cent worked out there); Laynhapuy Homelands; East Arnhem Regional Council tenders; Botsman (2019). Wreck count: Peter Botsman, 27 September 2026 (first-hand). Seven tyres: Botsman (2025), “Grand Final Night at Conway Station,” Working Papers: six tyres between Nhulunbuy and Mainoru and a seventh after Mainoru, October 2022.
16. Mrs Burarrwanga’s Centrelink pooling, and the proposal for a pooled vehicle fund. Peter Botsman, firsthand account, 6 October 2026.
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18. Mata Mata car maintenance list, May 2018, attached to the Mata Mata car details email of 15 May 2018. Engine numbers and VINs are omitted.
19. Peter Botsman, Mata Mata Funds update, 3 February 2019, including \$1,106.30 Gove Toyota Motor Parts, invoice 85328. Troopy registration email to Raymond Musgrave, 18 November 2022. Email to Robert Beasley, 6 November 2023. ISX, Mata Mata Transport campaign page, 2026.
20. Peter Botsman, Djotarra budget, 1 October 2026. Tyres from shop prices and gearbox from listed second-hand prices; freight, pickup and delivery, and repairs are Peter’s estimates, not quotes. Running total \$20,720 to \$22,000.
21. Peter Botsman, account of the MAF nurse flights to Mata Mata, October 2026 (about once every three weeks; not confirmed in any public source). MAF International (Arnhem Land), “Homeland clinics exemplify help, hope and healing in Arnhem Land,” 3 September 2026, on Laynhapuy Health nurses. MAF Australia, Arnhem Land location page, on patient transport and medevacs. Marthakal Homelands Health Service, homelands health service page (archived 2012).

Appendix A. The forty billion dollar figure

This short, conservative note addresses the forty billion figure, the claim that forty billion dollars a year is spent on Aboriginal Australia. It is often cited, including by Senator Hanson and One Nation, to argue against support for Aboriginal communities. There is much more to write. This note sets out what the figure contains.

A.1 Where the figure comes from

The Productivity Commission's 2017 Indigenous Expenditure Report estimated total direct government expenditure on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians at \$33.4 billion in 2015-16. The Institute of Public Affairs adjusted that for inflation to about \$39.5 billion, which became "forty billion dollars a year". The figure was popularised during the 2023 Voice referendum campaign, repeated by Sky News host Peta Credlin and cited by the singer Kamahl on The Project; Pauline Hanson has used a \$30 billion version in Parliament. In February 2025 AAP FactCheck found the \$39.5 billion "direct support" claim misleading.^{A1}

A.2 What the number actually includes

Of the \$33.4 billion, \$6 billion (18 per cent) was Indigenous-specific expenditure on programs designed only for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, such as Abstudy, Aboriginal legal aid, and Indigenous-specific health and housing programs. A further \$21.4 billion (64 per cent) was the Indigenous share of mainstream services available to all Australians: Medicare, schools, hospitals, aged care, prisons and others. The rest was apportioned general government spending such as defence, foreign aid and border control.^{A1}

Component (2015-16)	Amount	Share
Indigenous-specific programs	\$6.0 billion	18%
Indigenous share of mainstream services	\$21.4 billion	64%
Apportioned general government spending (defence, foreign aid, border control, etc.)	about \$6.0 billion	about 18%
Total direct expenditure (PC estimate)	\$33.4 billion	100%
IPA inflation-adjusted figure	about \$39.5 billion	—

The general government line is the remainder (\$33.4 billion less \$6.0 and \$21.4 billion), worked out here rather than taken from the report. [TO CONFIRM against the Productivity Commission report]

A.3 What it does not mean

It is not the budget of the National Indigenous Australians Agency (\$4.5 billion in 2022-23), not money handed to Aboriginal organisations or an "Aboriginal industry", and not a figure for any single year of targeted spending. It is a one-off 2015-16 estimate, inflated by the IPA, of Indigenous people's use of services all Australians receive, which runs at about double the per-person rate, mostly because of greater need and the higher cost of remote service delivery.

The Parliamentary Library put Australian Government spending on Indigenous-specific programs at about \$5.3 billion in 2023-24, or 0.77 per cent of the federal budget.^{A1} The 2026-27 Budget put \$1.2 billion over five years into Closing the Gap initiatives. [TO CONFIRM: source for the 2026-27 Budget figure is not in the appendix sources]

The 2017 report's per-person comparison is about \$45,000 per Indigenous person against about \$22,000 per non-Indigenous person. The gap is real but reflects heavier use of mainstream services, not a separate pot of money. The genuinely targeted \$6 billion is the part that could be redirected, audited or redesigned.

A.4 The Gap the forty billion has not closed

The July 2025 Closing the Gap Annual Data Compilation Report assessed 15 of the 19 socio-economic targets.^{A2} Four were on track (preschool enrolment, employment, and the two targets for land and for sea subject to legal rights); six were improving but not on track, including life expectancy; and four were worsening (early childhood development, adult imprisonment, children in out-of-home care, and suicide). [TO CONFIRM: these add to 14 of the 15 assessed targets; check the count and the remaining target against the report] Youth detention has worsened since 2022. In the Northern Territory, female life expectancy, childhood development, youth engagement, employment, adult imprisonment and youth detention are going backwards.

Life expectancy for people born in 2020-22 was 71.9 years for males and 75.6 for females, about eight years short of the non-Indigenous figure and not on track to close by 2031. Other headline measures:

- Healthy birthweight: 88.9 per cent in 2023.
- Children developmentally on track in all five domains: 33.9 per cent in 2024, and worsening.
- Year 12 or equivalent, ages 20 to 24: 68.1 per cent.
- Tertiary qualification, ages 25 to 34: 47 per cent.
- Youth fully engaged in employment, education or training: 58 per cent, against a 2031 target of 67.
- Employment, ages 25 to 64: 55.7 per cent, against a target of 62. On track nationally, worsening in the Northern Territory.
- Appropriately sized housing: 81.4 per cent.
- Adult imprisonment: 2,500.2 per 100,000 in 2025, and worsening.

A figure that counts hospital beds, prison places and the extra cost of remote services, and then asks why the Gap has not closed, answers its own question: the spending is largely the cost of the Gap, not an investment meant to close it.

A.5 The continent, and who has benefited

Before 1788 the whole continent was Aboriginal country. What followed was not a purchase but dispossession, and the pastoral, agricultural and mineral estate built on that taking has benefited overwhelmingly non-Aboriginal Australians; that estate has not been returned. ABARES found 154 million hectares, 20 per cent of Australia, in Indigenous ownership as at 2023, and about 536 million hectares, or 70 per cent, once native title and other special rights are counted.^{A3} Rights on paper are not the benefit of the continent: native title is a bundle of rights, often non-exclusive, over country already taken.

Arnhem Land is the clearest case. It is Aboriginal land under the Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act 1976, yet its people still cannot reliably keep a vehicle on the road.

A.6 Income: the Northern Territory and Arnhem Land

On AIHW measure 2.08 (2021 data), median gross weekly equivalised household income was \$465 for Indigenous adults in the Northern Territory and \$1,485 for non-Indigenous adults there: less than a third, and the widest gap of any jurisdiction. Nationally the figures were \$825 and \$1,141. In the 2021 Census the

median weekly personal income of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people aged 15 and over was \$323 in the Northern Territory, against \$540 nationally; in very remote areas the AIHW median for Indigenous adults was \$459 a week.^{A4}

East Arnhem is not a marginal case: in the 2021 Census, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people made up 89.9 per cent of the East Arnhem local government area and 81.1 per cent of West Arnhem. Non-Indigenous incomes in the region are concentrated in Nhulunbuy and the mining and service towns. Setting a Nhulunbuy wage against a homeland Centrelink payment and calling the difference a failure of Aboriginal spending is the same misuse as the forty billion figure. On \$323 a week, Spandonide's finding that transport can take 60 to 80 per cent of a very remote income explains why a car dies in two years and is not replaced.

A.7 Another way of counting: Paul Briggs and the Goulburn Murray plan

The Goulburn Murray Regional Prosperity and Productivity Plan, launched in 2021 by the Kaiela Institute on Yorta Yorta country and co-chaired by Paul Briggs AO, treats the economic exclusion of First Nations people as a productivity loss rather than a welfare cost. Deloitte Access Economics, and later KPMG, estimated that parity by 2036 would add around \$150 million a year to gross regional product; later forward estimates put it at an extra \$180 million a year and more than 500 full-time jobs. The ask of government to begin implementation was about \$38.5 million over three years, with the Munarra Centre for Regional Excellence as the training arm.^{A5} A region that counts the benefit of inclusion can name a return; a national argument that rolls prisons, hospitals and defence into "Aboriginal spending" cannot.

A.8 What this paper can fairly say

The forty billion figure is not a lie about a printed number but a misuse of one. Without the mainstream share, targeted spending is a fraction of the headline; beside the Gap dashboard, the headline is the cost of failure, not a program that was ever meant to buy a vehicle for Mata Mata. With the continent back in the ledger, the question reverses: not why so much has been spent on Aboriginal Australia, but why so little of the benefit of Aboriginal country has returned to the people whose country it was. The Arnhem Land income figures and the two-year life of a Toyota show that reversal on one homeland.

Appendix B. The other ledger: what a homeland vehicle costs, and who pays

B.1 Why a second count

Appendix A shows what the forty billion figure is not. This appendix starts from the other end, with one homeland and one vehicle: if the national figure is too big to mean anything, the homeland figure is small enough to check.

B.2 What a homeland vehicle costs

The Djotarra revival estimate came to \$20,720 to \$22,000 (section 7), and the Djotarra 2 target is around \$20,000 to \$22,000. With a vehicle life of about two years in Arnhem Land (six months to two and a half years nationally, on Spandonide's figures), the purchase alone comes to roughly \$10,000 to \$11,000 a year per vehicle (worked out here). The ISX contribution page puts running costs at \$5,000 for two months, about \$30,000 a year if that rate held. Currently we leave it to the community to raise these funds after the initial two months.

The Mata Mata budgets (section 6.1) give lower real figures: diesel and fuel in 2016 came to \$5,100, far below \$30,000 a year because it did not cover the day to day running costs in the community only the cost of getting the vehicle to Arnhem land. That level is therefore a high guide for fuel alone; whether it is a fair guide to fuel, servicing and repairs together is the question flagged above.

Doing without a car also costs money: in 2017 about \$650 (now at least \$850) each way from Mata Mata to Elcho Island or Gove, or about \$1,300 return (worked out here), when bush taxis would come at all; \$950 return for a Donydji bush taxi to Nhulunbuy; diesel over \$3.50 a litre on the Central Arnhem Highway in September 2026; and, while a repair takes six to twelve months, planes (see the Planes companion) and hitched rides.

B.3 What that means on a homeland income

On the Northern Territory median weekly personal income of \$323 for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people (2021 Census; Appendix A.6), a \$22,000 vehicle is about 68 weeks of one person's income before any fuel or repairs, and even the 2015 Land Cruiser, at \$6,567.19 registered, serviced and driven north, was about 20 weeks (worked out here). Where transport takes 60 to 80 per cent of median income in very remote communities (Spandonide), a car that must be replaced every two years cannot be bought out of income. It is bought through pooling, fundraising and supporters' goodwill, and is often not replaced at all.

B.4 Who has actually paid at Mata Mata

The record in section 6 is incomplete, but its shape is clear. Vehicles and repairs at Mata Mata have been paid for by:

- supporters, including the organisers, through the yearly Mata Mata budgets: the 2015 and 2016 Land Cruisers with their repairs, registration and fuel, and a 2017/18 budget that expected \$15,800 in income against \$36,940 in spending, \$21,140 short (worked out here)
- walkers and online donors: the 2016 Yolŋu Road walk and the Pozible campaign
- grants passed through for community needs: the \$9,250 from Goolarri/BAMA in 2019 (section 6.3) [TO CONFIRM: what Goolarri/BAMA is and how to describe it]
- individual supporters paying for single items: a radiator, and phone and internet

- Yolŋu families, through pooled Centrelink accounts and the pressure on whoever owns the one working car
- ISX campaigns, including Djotarra 2 in 2026

No government program described in the vehicles research appears in this list as a funder of homeland cars. Mata Mata's municipal and essential services, health visits and housing repairs are delivered by Marthakal under the NT Homelands Program [TO CONFIRM: funded status]; what no program funds is a homeland vehicle. The 2007 memorandum funded municipal and essential services for about 500 homelands at about \$20 million a year, roughly \$40,000 per homeland per year for all services (worked out here); SIHIP excluded homelands; and Closing the Gap concentrated on 29 priority communities. [TO CONFIRM: no government program dedicated to homeland vehicles appears in the sources]

B.5 What a targeted line could look like

As an illustration only, not a costed proposal: at roughly \$10,000 to \$11,000 a year per vehicle, one vehicle for each of the nearly 1,000 homeland communities identified in section 3 would cost about \$10 million to \$11 million a year, about 0.2 per cent of the roughly \$5.3 billion the Parliamentary Library puts on Indigenous-specific programs in 2023-24 (worked out here from Mata Mata's figures). This excludes running costs, which on the contribution page figures could exceed the purchase cost, although Mata Mata's 2016 fuel bill was much lower (B.2). [TO CONFIRM: Peter to decide whether to keep this extrapolation. It scales one homeland's estimate to the whole country]

Section 9 sketches what such a line would pay for: a pooled vehicle fund with a service budget and a fuel budget, fuel and mechanic accounts in the service town, help for people to buy their own cars through banks that understand the setting, and partnerships with Toyota and other car organisations. None of this needs forty billion dollars, only a budget line that recognises the homeland vehicle as shared infrastructure, like a road or a clinic.

B.6 What this appendix can fairly say

Counted from the bottom up, the cost of keeping a homeland moving is small, specific and visible, and it is carried today by Yolŋu families and a handful of supporters. When people quote forty billion dollars, the honest reply is to point to Mata Mata, which has no working car, and to the roughly \$22,000 it would take to change that for the next two years.

Support Djotarra 2: <https://www.isx.org.au/civicism/contribute/transact?reset=1&id=18>

Appendix: Photographs of vehicles at Mata Mata, October 2026

Further photographs taken by Peter Botsman at Mata Mata in October 2026. Figures 1 to 8 appear in the body of the paper.



Figure 9. Land Cruiser wagon with broken rear window, second view, Mata Mata, October 2026. Photo: Peter Botsman.



Figure 10. Land Cruiser wagon with broken rear window, third view, Mata Mata, October 2026. Photo: Peter Botsman.



Figure 11. Land Cruiser wagon with broken rear window, side view, Mata Mata, October 2026. Photo: Peter Botsman.



Figure 12. Troop Carrier left on a bush track, closer view, Mata Mata, October 2026. Photo: Peter Botsman.



Figure 13. Toyota with bonnet raised, Mata Mata, October 2026. Photo: Peter Botsman.



Figure 14. Track leading to a group of abandoned vehicles, Mata Mata, October 2026. Photo: Peter Botsman.



Figure 15. Burnt-out vehicles in a clearing, Mata Mata, October 2026. Photo: Peter Botsman.



Figure 16. Rusted car bodies and a loose door panel, Mata Mata, October 2026. Photo: Peter Botsman.



Figure 17. Burnt-out car body among regrowth, Mata Mata, October 2026. Photo: Peter Botsman.



Figure 18. Rusted wrecks and a stripped chassis in the bush, Mata Mata, October 2026. Photo: Peter Botsman.



Figure 19. Abandoned trailer, Mata Mata, October 2026. Photo: Peter Botsman.



Figure 20. Vehicle interior with seat and debris, Mata Mata, October 2026. Photo: Peter Botsman.



Figure 21. Vehicle cab interior, Mata Mata, October 2026. Photo: Peter Botsman.



Figure 22. Suspension and brake hub with the wheel removed, Mata Mata, October 2026. Photo: Peter Botsman.

Appendix C. Royalties (companion paper)

A summary of where Gove bauxite royalties have gone since 1970 — about A\$1.1 to A\$1.2 billion to Aboriginal people and organisations on the author’s estimate, less than half of it to Gove-area groups — is now the companion Royalties paper: Where Gove’s royalties went. Mata Mata, as a Marthakal homeland, is not on the published Gove section 64(3) split (Gumatj 65 per cent, Rirratjingu 20 per cent, Laynhapuy 15 per cent).

Appendix sources

- A1. Productivity Commission, Indigenous Expenditure Report 2017. AAP FactCheck, February 2025, verdict misleading on the \$39.5 billion direct-support claim. Parliamentary Library quick guide, 2023-24.
- A2. Productivity Commission, Closing the Gap Annual Data Compilation Report, July 2025, and dashboard.
- A3. ABARES, Australia’s Indigenous land and forest estate (2024), position as at 2023.
- A4. AIHW, Indigenous Health Performance Framework, measure 2.08 Income. ABS, Census 2021, Northern Territory Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander QuickStats and population summary.
- A5. Kaiela Institute, Goulburn Murray Regional Prosperity Plan (2021). Deloitte Access Economics; later KPMG and BCG forward estimates. Paul Briggs AO, co-chair.
- A6. Rio Tinto, Taxes paid reports 2015 and 2016, and payments-to-governments reports 2017–2025: Gove royalties to the Northern Territory of US\$29.6m (2015) to US\$80.4m (2025), converted at approximate yearly average exchange rates; about A\$647m over 2015–2025 and A\$124.7m in 2025 (worked out here). Rio Tinto (2013): A\$76m in royalties to the NT Government over the previous five years. Royalties for the Alcan years (2001–07) and for 2013–14 are not published and are estimated here.
- A7. Nabalco (1999), submission to the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs (inquiry into the Reeves Review), 26 February 1999: A\$90m in royalties paid to the Commonwealth and Northern Territory governments since 1970, about A\$9m a year, of which the local 30 per cent was about A\$2.7m a year. The Commonwealth’s equal payment into the Aboriginals Benefit Account is made under section 63(2) of the Land Rights Act and is not taken out of the Territory’s royalty. The Territory-wide share is an upper bound: some Aboriginals Benefit Account money is invested or spent on administration, and withholding tax is deducted.
- A8. Northern Land Council, Annual Report 2023–24, Note 20: A\$18.19m of Gove section 64(3) royalty equivalents received in 2023–24 (A\$13.19m in 2022–23). The Gove section 64(3) money is now split Gumatj 65 per cent, Rirratjingu 20 per cent and Laynhapuy Homelands 15 per cent (NLC resolution C122/4878, 7 December 2020).
- A9. Prime Minister Gillard and the Minister for Indigenous Affairs, “Historic Gove agreement to deliver long term benefits for North-East Arnhem Land,” media release, 8 June 2011. ATNS, Gove Traditional Owners Agreement (agreement 5599): A\$15–18m a year “depending on the price of bauxite”. Payments are confidential; about 14½ years (June 2011 to December 2025) × A\$15–18m = about A\$220–260m (worked out here, assuming the range held every year).

Appendix B uses figures from the body of this paper and its notes (Spandonide; the Donydji case; the 2007 memorandum; the Djotarra budget; the ISX contribution page; Mata Mata budgets 2015–2017, P. Botsman, October 2017; Mata Mata car maintenance list, May 2018) together with Appendix A sources 1 and 4.

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Unpublished records in the notes, and the policy instruments in note 12, are not listed. [TO CONFIRM: complete the entries that give only surname, journal and year]