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Mutitjulu women hit back at pedophilia claims



Setting the record straight ... Mutitjulu women and children.

Photo: *Kia Mistilis*

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Allegations of sex slavery and girls being offered "petrol for sex" shocked Australia and shamed the Mutitjulu people, guardians of Uluru. Now the women of Mutitjulu share their story for the first time through Kia Mistilis.

THE Aboriginal community of Mutitjulu has been the subject of sensational allegations on ABC's *Lateline*, starting with its June 21 report, "Sexual slavery reported in indigenous community".

The Office of Indigenous Policy Co-ordination cited the program in an email to the Registrar of Aboriginal Corporations, Laura Beacroft, who appointed an administrator to Mutitjulu. The community is challenging that decision in the Federal Court.

I spent five weeks in Mutitjulu in July and August. I attended two community meetings and a community council meeting, and interviewed Mutitjulu women elders, councillors and residents for their responses to the allegations on *Lateline*.

The women's united and consistent views reveal a big disparity between *Lateline's* reporting and facts on the ground.

They expressed shock and bewilderment at the ABC's portrayal of Mutitjulu and distress at the damage to their community's reputation.

They reject unequivocally the allegations on *Lateline* that a pedophile ring, child sex slaves, petrol warlords, murder, kidnappings, gangs, arson and "cliques of violent Aboriginal men" are part of life at Mutitjulu.

And they complain that *Lateline* has not heard the views of Mutitjulu's women. Council members say

Lateline has never requested a permit to visit, nor sought comment from the community's women.

Lateline's executive producer, Peter Charley, said yesterday that the program sought permission to enter Mutitjulu but the community council failed to respond.

The women also claim that the program reported from a distance, relying mostly on allegations by a former youth worker, Greg Andrews.

Mr Andrews appeared on TV, his face obscured and voice altered and described as a former youth worker. It was later revealed that he was a senior bureaucrat in Canberra whose job two years ago involved work at Mutitjulu and other Aboriginal communities.

The two other key *Lateline* sources are Mantatjara Wilson, who is not a Mutitjulu elder but lives 100 kilometres away in Amata, South Australia, and Dr Geoff Stewart, who worked at Mutitjulu Health Clinic until late 2002 and has acknowledged since the *Lateline* program that he prescribed Viagra to the alleged pedophile. Two other doctors have served at Mutitjulu since his departure.

Mutitjulu women acknowledge their community is not perfect and that domestic violence and alcohol abuse exist, but it is not crippled by these problems and is not dysfunctional.

As a single white woman I felt safe walking alone, day and night. I found no evidence of arson, gangs, petrol sniffing or petrol warlords; no evidence of children watching pornography, as alleged by Mr Andrews.

In Mutitjulu the issue is poverty, not pedophilia.

Its women feel strongly that the issues facing remote Aboriginal communities are not being identified for constructive discussion but are being exaggerated, sensationalised and pinned on their community at the expense of Mutitjulu's reputation - and the truth.

In the women's circle at a community meeting on July 23, Mutitjulu resident Daisy Walkabout drew a mixing bowl in the sand, making gestures of many stories from other places being put in and stirred around to produce lies. The women object strongly to statements by Ms Wilson, who they say lived at Mutitjulu for only a short time before moving to Adelaide with her new partner, leaving her two granddaughters in the care of local women. The women say that, in Aboriginal law, because she is not from Mutitjulu she has no right to speak for the community at Uluru.

Mutitjulu elder Elsie Wantatjara says: "She left long time ago, maybe seven years. She is not from here. She is from Amata. Mantatjara must be speaking about her community, not ours. Mutitjulu is not a war zone. Nobody burns houses here, there are no gangs here."

Ms Wilson's allegations that a pedophile is still at large in Mutitjulu and that the community is complacent about pedophilia are false, the women insist. They refer to the joint Northern Territory police and Family and Community Services investigation, which interviewed 300 people at Mutitjulu after the *Lateline* program and found no evidence of pedophilia. It found evidence of petrol being given to children but not of it being provided in exchange for sex.

Judy Trigger, Mutitjulu's community council vice-chairwoman, says on behalf of the women: "There is no such thing as a pedophile ring at Mutitjulu. If anybody comes here from another community and is in possession of alcohol or ganja [marijuana], we report them to the Northern Territory police. We

feel a duty to report these things to protect our children."

The community confirms the case of a suspected pedophile, formerly an officer with Uluru-Kata Tjuta National Park. It was Mutitjulu residents who became suspicious and began calling police whenever he entered the community. They alerted his employer, Parks Australia, which restricted the man's work and also reported him to police.

The man was confronted at a community meeting two years ago and asked to leave the area. He left last November, seven months before *Lateline's* special report went to air. Police say there was not enough evidence to charge him.

Since a coroner's inquest into the death of three petrol sniffers last year, the community says it has ended the practice. The council has denied access to petrol sniffers from other communities and resident petrol sniffers have been sent to Alice Springs for treatment, wherever possible.

Mutitjulu elder Barbara Tjikatu, who was made a member of the Order of Australia this year for her services to the community, said: "Petrol sniffing was brought here from South Australia. It does not happen now. There is no petrol sniffing here since Opal [odourless fuel] was introduced. The petrol sniffers went to Alice Springs."

I saw no evidence of petrol sniffing at Mutitjulu, and in fact federal government officials have congratulated the people for acting quickly to eliminate it.

Few *Lateline* viewers will be aware that its report included footage from Amata, Docker River and Ernabella communities. Only a portion of what was seen was from Mutitjulu, the women say. None of the Mutitjulu footage was current, it was not identified as being taken from files, and all the footage of petrol sniffing was from other communities.

The Mutitjulu women feel the report was neither fair nor balanced and contributes to a perception that violence towards women and children is part of, or sanctioned by, Aboriginal culture.

"Violence occurs in both black and white societies. That does not mean violence is part of our culture," said a Mutitjulu elder, Elsie Wantatjara.

"When violence and abuse occur in our communities it is directly related to abuse of drugs and alcohol."

However, *Lateline's* Peter Charley said using file footage was common practice, and the program believed women in Mutitjulu and surrounding communities supported the broadcast on June 21.

The women of Mutitjulu want to clear their name and restore their reputation as respected traditional owners of Uluru.

"How can people who do not understand our culture claim to know this?" says Ms Wantatjara. "They do not know our culture. I know my culture."

The photographer Kia Mistilis worked at Mutitjulu with an elder, Bob Randall, and the sculptor Hazel MacKinnon, taking photographs to accompany a book of stories about the Uluru stolen generations.

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