

A gem of an idea

IN 2004, BP AUSTRALIA TOOK UP A CHALLENGE THAT HAD YET TO BE ADDRESSED – TO DEVELOP A NEW TYPE OF FUEL WHICH WOULDN'T GIVE PETROL SNIFFERS A 'HIGH'. IT SUCCEEDED AND, AS TONY PARK DISCOVERS, HAS SAVED YOUNG LIVES IN REMOTE ABORIGINAL COMMUNITIES.

In the end, it's a young Aboriginal man, 23-year-old Matthew Brown, who shows us the way. We're on the broad, blood-red dirt road – the right road at last – to the tiny Aboriginal settlement of Papunya, 250km (155 miles) north-west of Alice Springs in central Australia. This is the outback and our four-wheel drive is loaded with water (lots of it), food, and a satellite phone, just in case.

The directions we received in 'Alice' have taken us on the scenic route, and while it definitely was scenic, the words of advice from several people about not driving in the desert in the dark are no longer being joked about as the sun paints the rocky McDonnell Ranges ahead of us a deep purple.

In the twilight, Matthew is striding down the road, on the way home after a day's work. As he walks, he tosses an Aussie Rules – aka Australian Football League (AFL) – ball in the air and the oval shape is momentarily silhouetted against a sky painted a riotous pink and gold.





Journey's end: hope is on the horizon as a long road of tears for remote Aboriginal communities draws to a close. Young men with too much time on their hands are now turning to football and school, rather than petrol sniffing.



All smiles: Papunya school principal Erica Prosser has seen her student numbers double in the year since the demise of petrol sniffing.

Matthew is every inch an athlete. Tall, lean and muscled – as much from his job working on cattle fences as from playing the sport he loves – he’s dressed in a mismatched uniform of Brisbane Lions football jersey and a Sydney Swans supporter’s cap.

He smiles as he accepts a lift. He’s shy, but quick to laugh, and we talk about his team – the Papunya Eagles – and their win in Alice on the weekend, and his promising career as a footballer. The Eagles won the local McDonnell Ranges District competition last year and Matthew was named best and fairest player, in his first season.

It’s hard to believe that not long before he started playing ‘footy’ he was an addict, who tried to hang himself when his substance abuse took him to rock bottom.

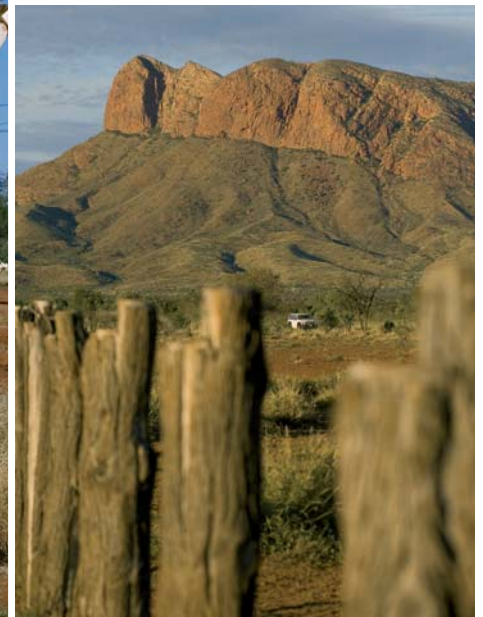
Matthew was reportedly one of the most chronically-addicted petrol sniffers in a community which had become infamous for, and synonymous with, a problem which afflicted scores of remote Aboriginal settlements.

Petrol sniffing causes brain damage. In small, remote communities it was killing about seven young Aboriginals a year and costing government millions of dollars in health funding – about US\$165,000 per addict – and fighting crimes committed by users.

By any measure, the city of Melbourne, with its trendy cafés, chic boutiques, bumper-to-bumper peak-hour traffic and gleaming office towers, is as different from Papunya as two settlements in the one country can be.

But it was here, in 2004, on receiving an email from an outback youth worker, that BP Australia decided to do something about the petrol sniffing epidemic.

“As I write, I can see a 10-year-old girl outside the window with half a Coke bottle



Life's sweet: Papunya is an Aboriginal word for honey ant (top left). Imposing Haasts Bluff, in the McDonnell Ranges, is a symbol of strength in a land that's seen its share of woe (above).

filled with unleaded petrol tied over her mouth and nose. She may well never reach her 12th birthday..." read the email.

The cry for help was sent to every fuel company in Australia, but only BP responded.

BP's fuels marketing business unit (BU) set up a project team led by Jan Sperling covering a wide range of different BUs to develop the new product. As a result of the team effort, a new 'unsniffable' unleaded fuel, with lower levels of aromatics – the chemicals which produce a 'high' for sniffers – was produced at Kwinana refinery in Perth, Western Australia.

BP Australia held an internal naming competition for the new product, and production and supply co-ordinator Ron Needham came up with the winner, Opal – a unique Australian gem that reflects the vibrant colours of the outback.

While regular unleaded fuel contains about 25% aromatics, Opal has only five. Its principal components are hydrocarbons such as octane. Opal has a characteristically sweet smell, distinct from the more pungent odour of regular unleaded.

Kwinana refinery shift optimisation team leader Alan Gwynne says developing the fuel was a matter of changing the mix of regular unleaded – leaving out some ingredients, and increasing the amount of others.

Gwynne says everyone involved in the project is proud of the part they played. "It's not very often you get to do something that's so good for people."

The new product was subjected to stringent performance, environmental and toxicological testing before being released to the market. It was rolled out to a limited number of remote communities in early 2005.

As well as developing a new product, BP also worked with local communities and

government to develop an holistic approach to the petrol sniffing problem. Along with the new fuel came investment in recreation camps for young people and programmes designed to get them back into school.

Early localised successes from the introduction of Opal led to the Australian government extending the rollout of the fuel to the outback capital of Alice Springs in February 2006. The government recently announced Opal would be distributed in Western Australia's East Kimberley region.

The country's federal health minister, Tony Abbott, says the government will introduce Opal wherever it's needed in the future.

"We've made it clear that if an indigenous community has got a petrol sniffing problem and it wants Opal petrol, we will do our damndest to supply it," Abbott says.

"We have to get the indigenous community's support for this shift, but we want to help. There should not be a community with a petrol sniffing problem that doesn't get Opal."

The government is spending US\$40 million over four years to subsidise production and distribution of Opal. The fuel is supplied to all service stations, regardless of brand, in the distribution area.

In the Melbourne head office, BP Australasia regional president Gerry Hueston likens the Opal project to another community initiative, where a BP service station in the Sydney suburb of Redfern is actively recruiting from its local Aboriginal population.

I put it to him that there's a difference between the development of a new fuel and its roll out across an area half the size of the EU, and a local recruitment programme, but he's having none of it.

"Philosophically, we believe in mutual benefit, so if we're doing business in an area

we believe we have an obligation to put something back in. [In the case of petrol sniffing] this was a product of ours that was being misused," Hueston explains.

"It was a classic tripartite approach, with the communities, government and BP working together to solve what was seemingly an intractable problem. With the right will, and bipartisan political support, it's amazing what you can make happen."

Hueston is the first to admit that producing an unsniffable fuel is only one small part of tackling the issues facing Aboriginal people in the 21st century. They are over-represented in prisons around the country and their life expectancy is still 17 years fewer than that of white Australians.

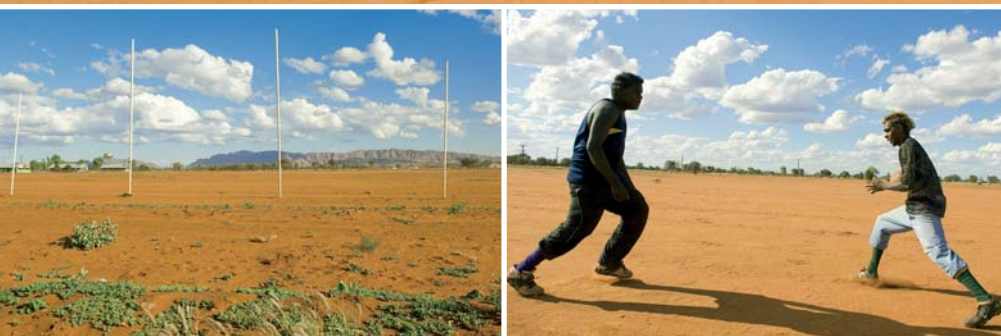
"At the end of the day, the kids were sniffing petrol because they were bored. It needed a broad-based approach, including things such as sport and education, but taking the fuel out of the equation made those other things possible," says Hueston. »

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Tony Abbott

Future stars

Papunya's hard-baked 'footy' field is a magnet for aspiring players, young and old. Left to right, Ludwig Brown, Desmond Inkamala and Dean Wilson strike a pose in the back row, while Junior, Kyle and Toby (in front) look forward to the day when they'll be playing for the Papunya Eagles.







Rock legend: "BP did a good job for every kid here," says community elder and former rock guitarist Sammy Butcher. He says the proof of Opal's success is now measured in kids' smiles and wins on the football field. Opposite page, dirt roads are often shared with 54-metre (180-foot) road trains (left). Opal fuel at a BP service station in Alice Springs.



“We’ve also been involved in back-to-school programmes, so that the kids don’t just go and find the next vice,” he adds.

Hueston is justly proud of the people who made Opal happen, and of the BP Australasia team as a whole. “Australia as a country is well known for being innovative, for punching above our weight, and we like to think that within BP we can do the same.

“This initiative has made the company here [in Australasia] more aware of what a force for good we can be. There’s a tremendous sense of pride and people are already wanting to find the ‘next Opal.’”

Mark Glazebrook, BP Australasia’s corporate citizenship manager, who has acted as the point man through much of the liaison with local communities and government, says he’s very proud to have been involved with the project.

“It’s a profound thing to have been involved with; to help save the lives of young people, and that’s what this is all about,” Glazebrook says.

Opal has strengthened BP’s relationships with state and federal government in Australia, and changed the way the company might otherwise have been perceived.

“Traditionally, companies such as BP would work with government in areas such as energy and the environment. Opal’s an example of the company becoming involved in health issues and offering to collaborate to improve health outcomes.”

Politicians, police, teachers, health and community workers all agree the tide has turned – dramatically. A recent study by the Aboriginal health council covering central Australia estimates sniffing has been cut by 80%.

One youth worker I speak to while researching the impact of Opal now describes the white people who work in Aboriginal communities as ‘pre-sniffing’ and ‘post-sniffing’ – that is, those who

remember the problem and those who have never experienced it.

The media has praised BP as well, with the country’s national newspaper *The Australian*, declaring recently, “The petrol sniffing crisis in central Australia is over.”

International media coverage of Opal, and word of mouth, has sparked interest in other indigenous communities where petrol sniffing is a problem. The week after we leave Papunya, a delegation from the Innu people of Canada is due to visit.

Tiny Papunya has a couple of claims to fame, other than its recent infamy. It’s the cradle of an internationally known style of indigenous art – the Papunya Tula movement – and home of Australia’s pioneering Aboriginal rock group, the Warumpi Band, which had a string of hits in the 1980s.

Former Warumpi Band lead guitarist and Papunya community elder Sammy Butcher shows us around an abandoned Nissan hut, which is being cleaned and repainted by the young members of the Papunya Eagles AFL team for use as a club house.

The hut’s walls are decorated with murals of victorious players and their winged totem, along with the distinctive red, black and gold Aboriginal land rights flag.

The former rock-star-turned-earth-moving-contractor helps out with the footy team, and also teaches music – another way of keeping young people away from harm and setting them on the right track.

“Opal did a real good job and BP did a good job for every kid here. It made everybody happy. Now, the kids are winning games, and there are smiling faces,” he says.

“BP does try hard... in every area, to help. You’re talking about human lives here, not just motor cars.

“Opal should go south, north, west and east. We have to make sure now that we keep our eyes open and make sure no-one

else is bringing in other petrol, or grog,” Butcher says, explaining that, like many other Aboriginal communities, Papunya has also been alcohol-free for several years.

Papunya’s school principal, Erica Prosser, arrived in the community in mid-2006, at the tail end of the petrol sniffing epidemic. She says Opal fuel, together with better co-ordination of the various agencies involved in targeting the problem, has brought immense change.

Prosser’s seen her enrolment figures more than double in a single year. While the school caters for children from the ages of three to 16, the surge in numbers came from young teenage boys – former petrol sniffers.

“We had 25 young fellas enrol at the start of this year, including a 15-year-old who had been sniffing and hadn’t been to school in five years,” Prosser says. “We’re seeing a huge difference in a short time – a huge change. Our numbers are still increasing.”

We catch up with Matthew again the day after we first met him, in the afternoon, when the temperature has dropped to a more comfortable 30°C (86°F).

Papunya’s footy field is an unforgiving circle of sun-baked red dirt. A hot wind blows dust across it and the adjoining houses. It’s hardly a climate conducive to hard exercise, but even before training’s due to start, future stars from ages six to 16 are wandering over.

The McDonnells in the background are glowing a warm, mellow orange beneath a wide blue sky dotted with decorative little clouds. There won’t be a drop of rain for at least another seven months, but a seed’s taken hold in Papunya.

The former addict, who had little to look forward to other than brain damage, a wheelchair, or death, is looking forward to supervising training for the under 17s team – inspiring them. He says he enjoys teaching these ‘young fellas’.

“It’s good, I like the exercise and the training,” he says. “Before, it was bad. People were weak – not strong. Things have changed now.” **BPM**

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Mark Glazebrook

Writer biography >

TONY PARK is a freelance writer who has contributed to magazines and national newspapers in Australia, the UK and South Africa. He is also the author of four novels, all set in Africa.