



OUR COMMUNITY

A **STUDY GUIDE** BY KATE DIMECH

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WALGETT
POPULATION 2300
ELEVATION 130m

**LIGHTNING
RIDGE**

POPULATION



Introducing *Our Community* > An exploration of the concept of 'community' in the far northwest of NSW propels an intimate expedition through the townships of Walgett, Lightning Ridge and Sheepridge > *Our Community* is a documentary that reveals that despite the cultural diversity of the people and the challenges they have before them, the people of the Walgett, Lightning Ridge and Sheepridge communities share a pride, passion and resilience, and an inexorable spirit of 'belonging'. > Throughout the journey, past misconceptions about racial and economic divisions are clarified and benevolent bonds are celebrated.



USING OUR COMMUNITY IN THE CLASSROOM

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students should be advised that this documentary might contain images of deceased persons.

Our Community addresses the strained relationship which exists between the Indigenous and white communities in the Walgett Shire. Reflecting on racial issues, and the topic of reconciliation in Australia, may raise hostile debate among students. A prudent approach might focus on the kindly attitudes of the interviewees and concentrate on the benefits of reconciliation to a country community rather than focusing on reconciliation from a national or political perspective.

The documentary is suitable for students from Upper Primary to Upper Secondary level. It is of specific interest and relevance to teachers and

students of:

- Studies of Society & Environment (SOSE/HSIE)
- English
- Politics

Learning outcomes

- Critically compare representations of people, events and issues.
- Explain how causes, motives and consequences may be related.
- Analyse how diversity and social cohesion have affected Australian civic life.
- Understand multiple and different views of Australian identity and how they have been formed.
- Draw on a repertoire of strategies to maintain understanding through a dense or extended text.

BEFORE WATCHING THE DOCUMENTARY

Using an atlas and an outline map of

NSW, mark the locations of Walgett, Lightning Ridge, Sheeppyard and Sydney. Draw a connecting line between the three towns in Walgett Shire and note the distance between them, as well as their distances from Sydney.

As a group, discuss the idea of 'community' and arrive at a few definitions. Start with 'A community is ...' and finish the sentence. List your definitions on a piece of poster paper or on the chalkboard.

Identify the people that make up your own school community (teachers, students, nurse etc.) and think about the contributions each of them make to school life. On a large poster or chalkboard, draw a representation of each person or write their name and position and note their contributions to the rest of the school community.



COUNTRY LIFE

Life in the country can be tough. Drawbacks such as high levels of unemployment, limited access to healthcare, harsh weather conditions and a lack of educational opportunities provide compelling reasons to remain in the comfort of the big cities. However, country life has many appealing qualities as well. Some of those are described by Vlad Matic, GP in Walgett who mentions clean air or no traffic or totally quiet nights or ... a sky full of stars that's not killed by the reflected light of the city.

In watching *Our Community*, the residents' fondness for their towns is evident. They don't ignore the negative aspects of their communities but there is a strong sense of town pride and they focus on the virtues their towns possess.

Don Lillyman says of Walgett:

[It's] one of the friendliest towns that you'll ever visit. And once you get over what's on the surface and get used to the bars on windows, and start meeting the people ... then you'll find something special.

Throughout the documentary, we hear many comments from the residents of

all three towns that reflect a genuine appreciation of their country lives. Red Beard says of Sheeppyard 'If you didn't like it, you wouldn't be here ... Once you drive up that dirt road ... You either like it or you don't'. This almost protective attitude conveys the dedication the residents have towards their towns. It shows that conclusions



TOWN	POSITIVE COMMENTS	NEGATIVE COMMENTS
Walgett		
Lightning Ridge		
Sheepyard		

shouldn't be drawn from some of the inhabitants' rough exteriors as the true heart of a country town lies not in the visible features of the landscape, but within the people themselves.

Activity: 'The last frontier'

Peter Bull says of Sheepyard:

If you want to change something, change it in the town, a big town or something like that. But no, this is the last frontier so let's keep it that way.

Knowing some of the disadvantages a life in the country can impose, it's uplifting to hear the Walgett Shire residents speak so affectionately of their towns.

Think about the town where you live. Do you feel pride in your town? Why or why not? What things, if any, would you change?

- Discuss the term 'last frontier'. What do you think Peter Bull

means when he describes Sheepyard as the last frontier?

- In your workbook, draw up a table like the one above and while watching the documentary, keep a track of the positive and negative comments the residents make about their towns.
- Taking into account the comments you have put into your table, what are some of the reasons one might or might not consider moving to a country town?



A SENSE OF BELONGING

Residents of country towns can experience feelings of isolation when they live hundreds of kilometres from the nearest capital city. Loneliness and high rates of unemployment are common problems. Suicide in rural areas is also more common than in major cities, especially among men and in communities of less than 4,000 people. However, strong community bonds can help to improve the quality of life for country people.

While watching *Our Community* we can see that residents of the three towns share a sense of belonging. Some of their feeling is connected to particular buildings, sporting clubs or places in the local environment.

In Walgett, the junction of the Namoi and Barwon rivers holds strong cultural significance for the Kamilaroi people (the Indigenous people of the area) and it is also an area where the

younger residents go to swim and fish. Vic Beale says '...it's just great to be around the river. It makes me feel good. Makes me feel like there's a ... belonging'.

With 3,600 members and a number of annual tournaments, the Lightning Ridge District Bowling Club is another of these places. It provides opportunities for social contact, not just for those within the small community but also for the masses of tourists that

converge on Lightning Ridge each year. Bill Trevethan, President of the Lightning Ridge RSL says '... our population keeps growing with people coming back to live here ... They must have seen something up here a bit better than where they were'.

The Sheepyard Inn is more than just a hotel. As Sue Tomlinson, the local publican says '... it's a community centre for people to meet ... it's a bonding area'. Sheepyard also has an



officially recognized war memorial and as mentioned by Pat Fletcher '[the war memorial] has brought a lot of people together. We had a Carols by Candlelight down there and ... that had a good sense of human spirit'.

People living in large cities can forget about some of the smaller things in life, like the feeling of belonging we can get from being part of a small community. As Sue Tomlinson says, 'we have absolutely nothing at all ... but we have everything ...'

Activity: Where we belong

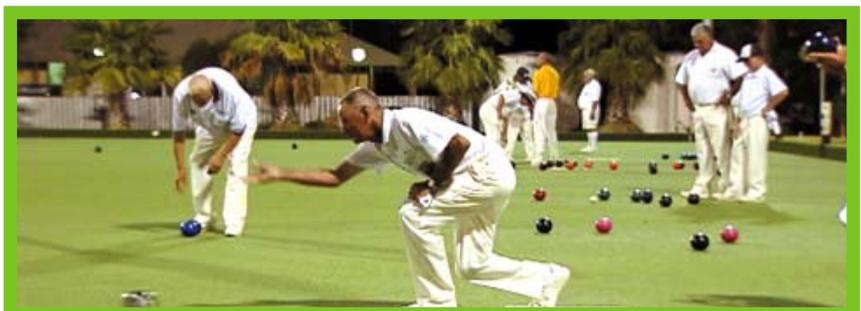
Throughout our lives it is important to feel that we belong. Think about your own situation. You may get a sense of belonging when you are around certain people such as your family and your friends or you may feel that

you belong when you are in a certain place, such as a park. Perhaps, as in the documentary, you may feel a strong sense of belonging to the wider community.

- As a class, discuss why it is important to feel as though you belong. Consider the effects loneliness and isolation can have on a person's development and self esteem. How does being in a supportive

community help to overcome feelings like these?

- Think of a place that gives you a feeling of 'belonging'. It could be a sports club, a place of worship, your family home or even a park. Write a paragraph about your place of belonging and use bright colours to write down some 'emotion' words to describe how this place makes you feel.





Multiculturalism

Multiculturalism is a sensitive subject in Australia. As we have seen from recent riots in Cronulla NSW, some communities are dangerously divided by their cultural differences and this can lead to extremely violent actions. However, *Our Community* shows that not everybody feels threatened by multiculturalism and some people embrace the diversity it offers. Alan Hall says of Lightning Ridge ‘... it’s an example for Australia ... I think we have fifty-two or -three different nationalities here, and we’re very proud of that and we all get on well together’.

The Australian government has a policy of multiculturalism that promotes acceptance of and respect for our cultural diversity. The Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs says:

Australia’s cultural diversity is a key part of our national identity. According

to the 2001 Census, 23% of Australians were born overseas.

The Commonwealth Government explains multiculturalism in the following way:

Australian multiculturalism...embraces the heritage of Indigenous Australians,

early European settlement, our Australian-grown customs and those of the diverse range of migrants now coming to this country.

In keeping with this statement, Claire Murray in *Our Community* says: ‘It doesn’t matter what walk of life you come from, you’re just accepted. There’s ... no judging people.’



Activity: Australia 'The lucky country'

In Australia, there is freedom to think and speak freely and to practice any religion without fear of persecution or prosecution. These are some of the reasons that many people consider Australia to be 'the lucky country'. Drago Panich mentions that there are people in Lightning Ridge who

escaped the Communist Regime in Eastern Europe and there are other refugees from the war in Bosnia. For many migrants, leaving their country of origin is not so much a choice, but a decision based on necessity to avoid war, persecution or hopeless poverty. In the 2004-2005 migration year, Australia accepted over 120,000 immigrants and that number is increasing.

- Imagine you were leaving your

home country to make a better life for yourself and your family. What aspects of life in an Australian country town do you think might appeal to you?

- As a class, discuss the benefits of being part of a multicultural society. Consider these benefits and contrast them with being part of a society with only a single culture.



EXTENSION ACTIVITY: THE 1965 FREEDOM RIDE

Our Community touches upon the tension that exists between the Indigenous and white communities in Walgett. Although the interviewees speak fondly of their town, there is a hint of discontent that the two communities still live quite separate lives. Melanie Bradley, proprietor of the beauty salon says: ‘Aboriginal and non-Aboriginals are quite segregated. It’d be nice to be able come together a bit more.’

This open-minded attitude contrasts with events over forty years ago, when discrimination against Indigenous Australians was not only prevalent, but also permissible. In February 1965, a group of about thirty students from the University of Sydney set out to change the way Australia treated its Indigenous population. They travelled through northern New South Wales in an old bus to confront the issue of racial discrimination then rife in country towns.

Inspired by the 1961 Freedom Ride in the USA, the students intended to

highlight the appalling living conditions of Indigenous people, protest against the segregation of public places such as cinemas and clubs and conduct surveys on the issues facing the Indigenous people in these towns. One of the towns they visited was Walgett. At the time, the RSL (Returned & Services League) club in Walgett refused membership to Indigenous ex-servicemen, and Anzac Day was the only day they were even allowed admittance. The students formed a picket line in front of the RSL holding protest banners. Throughout the demonstration, some members of Walgett’s Indig-

enous community joined the picket line but their support of the protest only further enraged some of Walgett’s white inhabitants.

During their protest, the protesters suffered threats and violence at the hands of the white community, both men and women. That evening the students were asked to leave the church hall where they had intended to spend the night. Fearing for their safety and having nowhere else to stay, they decided to leave Walgett. However, on the way out of town, their bus was forced off the road by a

truck. Fortunately, no one suffered any physical injuries.

Despite this experience, the Freedom Riders continued their journey around NSW. They found that discrimination and poor Indigenous living conditions were common in country NSW. Their actions helped draw attention to the inequality of the Indigenous community and quite possibly had a strong influence on the Australian public, ninety per cent of whom voted 'yes' in the referendum to remove two parts of the Australian constitution which discriminated against Indigenous people.

Our Community demonstrates that some attitudes have changed in Walgett since 1965 and many of the residents anticipate a future where the whole community is united.

Activity: Racism – a thing of the past?

Although we do not witness any racial incidents in the documentary, we are led to believe that racism is still present in the Walgett community. However, people's opinions about the

current state of affairs differ. Vince, the taxi proprietor says:

There's ... two sides to the story with some whites don't like the Aboriginals and some of the Aboriginals don't like the whites. But it's getting better and better every year. It's sort of slowly disappearing.

However, Lesley Tighe, Court Youth Program Coordinator, says:

There's a bit of racism in Walgett. It's everywhere. And I don't think it'll change unless everyone starts working together. Once both cultures can work together, then our society will change.

- What do you think Vince means when he says there's 'two sides to the story'?
- What factors in their lives could cause two residents of the same community to arrive at two such different opinions?
- In 2005, a group of young people retraced the Freedom Ride journey around New South Wales. Research the Freedom Rides of 1965 and 2005. How do you think

the experience of the 2005 Freedom Riders differed from that of the 1965 Freedom Riders? Which Freedom Ride do you think had the biggest impact on the community of Walgett and why?

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