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MEDIA RELEASE

Worldwide knowledge and understanding of Australian Indigenous cultures, past and present

Native title the key to ‘closing the gap’

Native title is the key to closing the health, education, employment, housing gaps between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians a speaker has told the Native Title Conference in Perth today.

Delivering his presentation to the Native Title Representative Bodies (NTRB) day at the conference, National Native Title Council Chair Brian Wyatt said the government’s native title reform agenda is a welcome shift from the litigation of the past.

“We have an opportunity now to commence a meaningful dialogue with the Australian Government to develop a framework for nation building that has real benefits for our families and our communities,” Mr Wyatt said.

“How we deal with native title is a fundamental test of who we are. It is the fundamental building block to the health of our communities and families, our wellbeing and certainly our economic prosperity.”

Applauding Attorney General Robert McClelland’s comments that native title should be seen as an avenue for economic development, Mr Wyatt said the government’s review of the native title system should prioritise settlement by agreement over litigated contests.

“Now we need to see some policy and legal imagination that can close the gap between current understandings of economic development and the traditional rights to hunt, fish and gather.”

While the government’s proposals to ‘fast-track’ native title agreements may work well for industry and government, Mr Wyatt said Indigenous Traditional Owners still need to be fully engaged in negotiations and understand the decisions being made.

The ninth annual Native Title Conference, *Koorah, Yira, Boordah – Past, Present, Future*, continues until Thursday at the Perth Convention Exhibition Centre.

Tomorrow, Chairperson of the Waitangi Tribunal and Maōri Land Court Chief Judge Joe Williams will deliver the annual Mabo Lecture at 9:00am.

Media Contacts

***Note to electronic media:** A short DVD of archival footage from the film *Mabo: Life of an Island Man* by Trevor Graham is available to use as part of any news item about the Mabo Lecture or the conference.

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