

## BHP: Yes to first peoples vote

ANDREW MACKENZIE THE AUSTRALIAN MAY 27, 2015 12:00AM

**Beginning today, National Reconciliation Week celebrates two events which have contributed to the transformation of the relationship between the resources industry and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples.**

There have been 44 referendums since the Constitution came into force in 1901. Only eight have been successful. On this day in 1967, Australia's most successful referendum was held. More than 90 per cent of the nation voted "Yes" to give federal parliament the power to make laws in relation to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples and to allow for them to be included in the census.

And one week from today 23 years ago — on June 3, 1992 — the High Court delivered its landmark Mabo decision recognising Aboriginal people had lived in Australia for thousands of years and enjoyed rights to their land according to their own laws and customs. The decision paved the way for the Native Title Act and formal agreement making processes in relation to the development of resource projects.

Not unlike the dialogue in relation to constitutional recognition of Australia's first peoples, these landmark events rightly involved extensive public discussion. This led to step-changes in formal recognition of the rights and interests of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples, with broad public and political support.

The goal of recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples in the Constitution is a further step-change. This change aligns with BHP Billiton's approach to working with indigenous peoples. We recognise their traditional rights and seek to contribute to their sustainable economic empowerment, social development needs and cultural wellbeing.

Indigenous peoples are critical partners and stakeholders in many of BHP Billiton's operations within Australia and around the world. Many of our operations are located on or near traditional indigenous lands. The long-term nature of our operations allows us to establish lasting relationships with the indigenous communities in which we operate and those neighbouring our operations.

Through this on-the-ground experience, we understand indigenous peoples often have profound and special connections to, and identification with, lands and waters which are tied to their physical, spiritual, cultural and economic wellbeing.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders are now deriving greater direct benefit from and participation in resource development projects, with new and innovative mechanisms to deliver economic benefits. Last financial year BHP Billiton's Australian businesses employed more than 900 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and spent in excess of \$120 million on procurement of goods and services from indigenous businesses. BHP Billiton recently announced a five-year, \$28.8m program supporting the CSIRO to increase interest and achievement among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM).

Constitutional Recognition which acknowledges Australia was first occupied by Aboriginal and

Torres Strait Islander Peoples, which fosters respect for their continuing cultures, languages and heritage and which acknowledges their relationships to traditional lands and waters would be consistent with the values underpinning the relationships we at BHP Billiton seek to have with indigenous Australians.

BHP Billiton today announces its support for the Recognise campaign to build public understanding of the issue. Similar to the historic success of the 1967 Referendum and passage of the Native Title Act, positive step-change will depend on effective political leadership which builds wide consensus and support, including within the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community.

Andrew Mackenzie is CEO of BHP Billiton.

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