

Gumatj forest project: new skills helping a tree to become a house

ForestWorks presentation at Garma festival

NEWLY-learned indigenous skills have turned the Gumatj Corporation's forestry project in northeast Arnhem Land into an exciting reality.

The project featured prominently in a forum at the Yolthu Yindi Foundation Garma festival of traditional culture at Gulkula, about 14 km southeast of Gove in the Northern Territory.

Chief executive of ForestWorks Michael Hartman was a keynote speaker at the Yolungu forestry project forum, which outlined how economic opportunities, business development, training and employment opportunities and community development plans are "closing the gap".

Mr Hartman said the festival was highly successful and the Gumatj Corporation forestry project was well received.

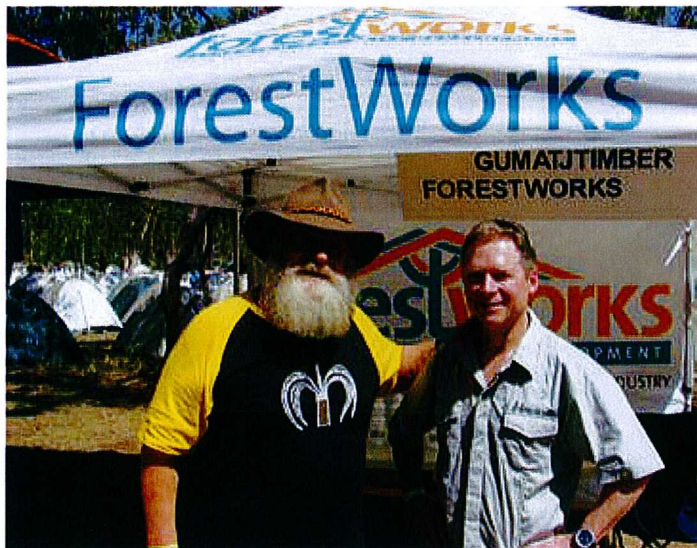
"ForestWorks' role was to assist with getting workers skilled – enough to make the tree become a house," Mr Hartman said.

The Gumatj Corporation, as part of the Yolungu forestry project, hired indigenous locals to work in the mill, build a workers' bunkhouse and another house, as well as quality furniture.

The workers learned valuable skills in forestry, harvesting and housing construction and furniture making through on-the-job skills training.

Mark Blackwell, a worker made redundant at Scottsdale Timber in Tasmania, is now employed by Gumatj Corporation and oversees the milling of local timber. Mark says he looks forward to the future of the project as he sees the benefits to the community unfolding on a daily basis.

The managing director of Forestry Tasmania Bob Gordon



Actor Jack Thompson visits Michael Hartman at the ForestWorks display tent at the Garma Festival this month.

has been working with the Gumatj people of east Arnhem Land to establish a sustainable timber industry which includes harvesting and milling timber, housing construction, furniture making and training in Nhulunbuy and Wadeye.

Mr Gordon was a keynote speaker at the forum and spoke about the potential of managed forests for employment, carbon capture and the importance of self determination. Forestry Tasmania also provided a working display of the Lucas Mill as well as furniture making workshops by local workers.

"It's an opportunity for local landowners to consider undertaking similar projects," Mr Gordon said.

ForestWorks' display tent adjacent to the Forestry Tasmania-Lucas Mill site was a big crowd-puller. Deputy chief executive Jane Bartier was on hand to answer questions and handed out information about ForestWorks and the opportunities for indigenous

workers in the forest, wood, paper and timber products industries.

"It was an amazing environment for real cultural exchange and learning," Jane said. "Many people visited our tent and were very interested in what the



The Gumatj people of east Arnhem Land are building a sustainable timber industry which includes harvesting and milling timber, housing construction, furniture making and training.

industry had to offer in terms of job opportunities and skills development.

"It was exciting to be part of such an important national indigenous cultural event."

Further dips in US housing

BUILDING material supplier James Hardie is bracing for a further downturn in the US housing industry as building starts stall at the worst lows for almost 50 years.

Chief executive Louis Gries said sales volumes – and profit – were almost certainly going to be lower than last income year. That would be a consequence of "disappointing and fragile" recovery in the US housing market after the expiry of government tax incentives in April.

US housing starts for the June quarter were 142,000, up from last year's corresponding figure of 124,000, but still 74% down from its 2005 peak. The annualised number of housing starts – 549,000 – was the second lowest since 1963.

James Hardie generates more than three-quarters of its revenue from the US, but a strong performance from its business in Australian, New Zealand and Philippines saw earnings doubled.

Industry analysts say despite record low prices the US housing market will not recover unless confidence and employment figures improve. Economic reports show American firms shed 131,000 jobs last month, double the amount expected.