

Wittenoom and Yampire asbestos management areas, Western Australia, from an Aboriginal Corporation and Traditional Owner perspective

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Abstract

The Banjima people have occupied their homelands in the Central Pilbara region of Western Australia for at least 45,000 years. The Wittenoom and Yampire asbestos mines are located in the heartland of Banjima Country, in an area of profound cultural significance. This keynote paper presents a Traditional Owner and Aboriginal Corporation perspective on the history and continuing legacy of blue asbestos mining at Wittenoom and Yampire, and Banjima's ongoing pursuit of accountability, remediation and healing of Country.

Commercial mining of blue asbestos on Banjima Country commenced at Yampire Gorge in 1937 and later expanded to Wittenoom Gorge and Colonial Gorge. Mining ceased in 1966 when the operation became uneconomic. The unrehabilitated Wittenoom asbestos mine is widely recognised as one of the most significant contaminated sites in the southern hemisphere, with a government-mandated exclusion zone of more than 46,000 hectares. The Western Australian Government progressively closed the Wittenoom townsite and withdrew government services due to the significant risks posed by asbestos contamination, with the area recognised as unsuitable for ongoing residential occupation. Exposure to asbestos from the mines, processing facilities, former township and surrounding contaminated areas has contributed to a substantial burden of asbestos-related disease among former workers, residents and other affected communities. Wittenoom asbestos exposure has been associated with more than 2,000 deaths, primarily from mesothelioma and other asbestos-related diseases, with health impacts continuing to emerge decades after exposure due to the long latency period of these conditions.

Six decades after mining ceased, asbestos tailings remain exposed and continue to spread through wind, water and human activity. This ongoing contamination has caused extensive degradation of land and waterways, destruction of cultural heritage, loss of safe access to Country, and continuing risks to human health, animals and the environment. For Banjima people, the impacts are direct, indirect and cumulative, affecting health and wellbeing, native title rights, cultural practice, spiritual connection, and the ability to care for Country.

This paper discusses the environmental, cultural, health and social impacts of the Wittenoom and Yampire Asbestos Management Areas on Banjima Country and Banjima people. It also outlines Banjima's legal action against the State of Western Australia, which seeks remediation of the unrehabilitated asbestos tailings and recognition of the harm caused. The Wittenoom and Yampire Asbestos Management Areas are not only contaminated sites, they represent an unresolved environmental justice and failure to protect cultural heritage, native title and public health. The time for healing Country is overdue.

Keywords: *Banjima, Wittenoom, Yampire, asbestos, Aboriginal cultural heritage, native title, contaminated sites, mine rehabilitation, public health, environmental justice*

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1 Introduction

The authors acknowledge that this paper does not seek to speak on behalf of all Banjima people, as the authors do not hold collective cultural authority to do so. Rather, the purpose of this paper is to share aspects of Banjima experiences and perspectives relating to the Wittenoom and Yampire Asbestos Management Areas from a Native Title Corporation perspective, and from the personal lived experiences from a Banjima director. It aims to discuss Banjima's evolving approach to engagement with the government and mining proponents, and the future management of Country.

2 Banjima people and Banjima Country

The Banjima people have occupied their homelands in the Central Pilbara region of Western Australia (Figure 1) for at least 45,000 years (Parmington & Canning 2025). Since the 1800's they have experienced intergenerational and collective trauma from being removed from their land, relocated to missions, forced to work on pastoral stations under harsh conditions, and then removed again in the 1960's when Aboriginal station workers were laid off *en masse* after achieving citizenship and equal pay rights (Parmington & Canning 2025). They also suffered as part of the Stolen Generations. These events and experiences are still strongly felt today.



Figure 1 Banjima Country Location

Before the *Native Title Act 1993* (Commonwealth of Australia 1993), Aboriginal people, including Banjima people, had little formal ability to influence decisions affecting their Country. In 1998, Banjima people lodged a native title claim seeking recognition of their ancestral lands. Following contested proceedings with the State of Western Australia and other respondents, the Federal Court found in 2013 that native title existed in parts of the claim area, with the final determination made in 2014 (Banjima People v State of Western Australia 2013). Within the Banjima determination area there are approximately 10,000 known archaeological sites, some dating to the earliest periods of human occupation in the region (Parmington & Canning 2025).

3 Wittenoom and Yampire Mines

The Wittenoom (*Ngambigunha* in Banjima language) and Yampire mines sit in the heartland of Banjima Country, in an area of profound cultural significance at the northern edge of what is now known as Karijini National Park (Figure 2). In Banjima culture, *Warlu*, the water serpent creation ancestor, cut through the land to create the gorges and waterways. These places contain permanent waterholes, which are rare in the dry

Pilbara landscape, and have long been used as cultural gathering places. The area includes numerous examples of rock art, including of goanna, kangaroo and snake figures painted in a rare yellow ochre, demonstrating the cultural significance of these locations (Illuminate Films 2026).

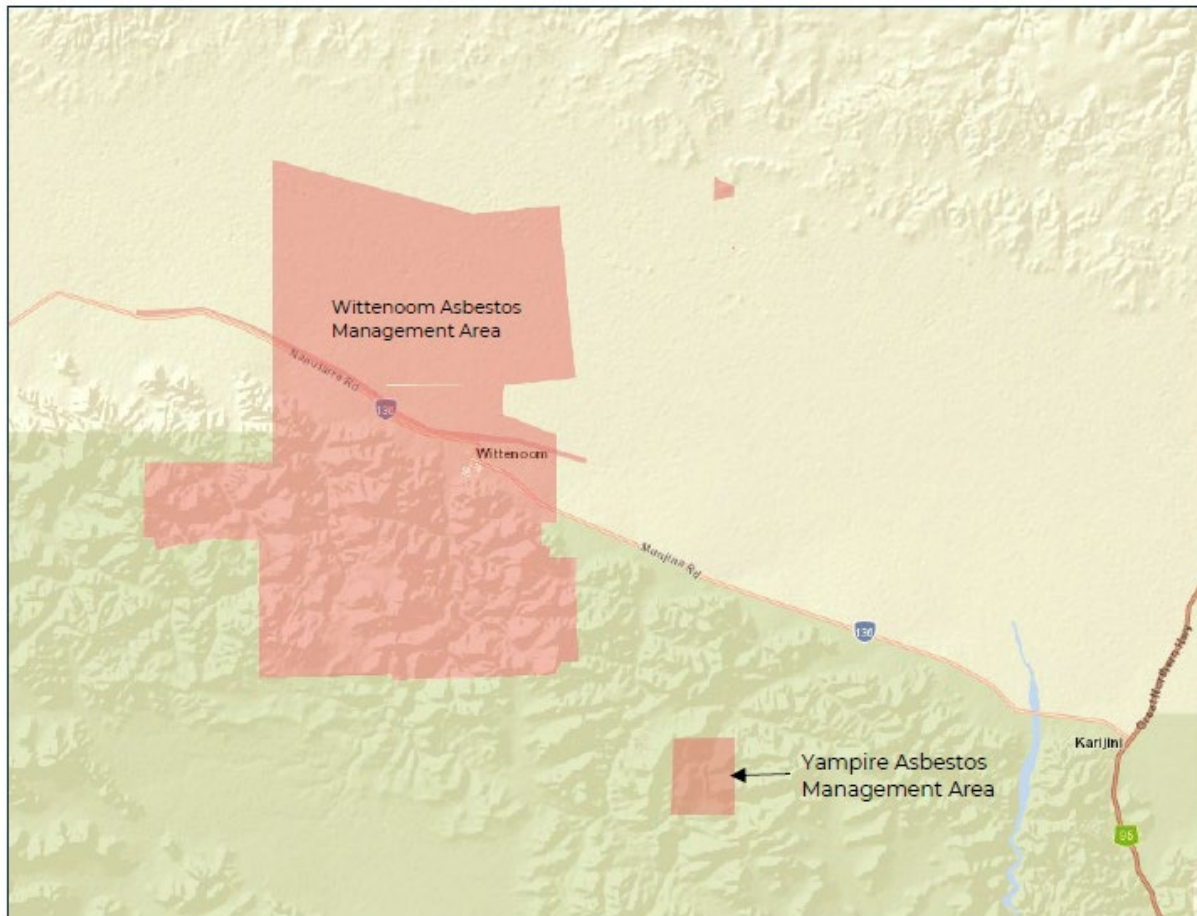


Figure 2 Wittenoom and Yampire Asbestos Management Area Locations (Shire of Ashburton 2023)

4 Banjima Native Title Aboriginal Corporation

Following the native title determination, Banjima Common Law Holders were required to form an Aboriginal corporation to hold the determination lands in trust for the benefit of all Banjima people. Banjima Native Title Aboriginal Corporation (BNTAC) was formed through that process. BNTAC is the registered Prescribed Body Corporate representing Banjima people. Its primary role is to hold and manage native title rights and interests on trust, safeguard cultural heritage, and support social and economic benefits for the Banjima community. The corporation appoints an executive team to manage daily operations and is governed by a Board of Banjima persons, supported by relevant Elder committees who speak for Country on heritage and environmental matters.

Since its establishment, BNTAC has developed over the last 10 years extensive experience engaging with government and negotiating agreements with mining companies, including Australia's 5 largest Pilbara iron ore miners who are all operating on Banjima Country. These mines collectively produce approximately 325 million tonnes of iron ore per annum, representing almost one-third of Australia's total annual production (Parmington & Canning 2025).

5 Asbestos mining at Wittenoom and Yampire

A brief timeline history of key events at Wittenoom and Yampire is presented below in Table 1 (BNTAC 2026).

Table 1 Timeline of key historical events

Year	Key events
1930	The Merewether and Price report identified asbestosis as a disease associated with asbestos exposure and described its serious health effects.
1937 – 1938	Prospecting and early small-scale blue asbestos mining commenced in the Hamersley Ranges, including at Yampire and Wittenoom Gorges, by Western Australian Blue Asbestos Fibres Ltd and the Hancock and Wright interests. Traditional Owner consent was not sought.
1943	Australian Blue Asbestos Ltd took over the Hancock and Wright interests. Lang Hancock remained involved in mine management until 1948.
1946	The Yampire Mine closed after producing approximately 300 tonnes of asbestos fibre.
1947	Wittenoom was developed and gazetted as a town to support the asbestos mining workforce and their families. Its population later peaked at 881 residents in 1961.
1948	CSR Ltd acquired full ownership of the Wittenoom and Yampire operations through Australian Blue Asbestos Ltd.
1959	The Public Health Department of Western Australia investigated the occurrence of silicosis and asbestosis among miners employed at Wittenoom.
1966	CSR Ltd announced the closure of asbestos mining operations at Wittenoom for economic reasons. More than 3 million tonnes of asbestos tailings remained across the mine areas and surrounding landscape. Asbestos tailings continued to be used in and around the townsite, roads and other infrastructure, contributing to broader contamination risks.
1978	The Western Australian Government began phasing down the former town of Wittenoom because of health concerns associated with airborne asbestos fibres.
1990	Midnight Oil released 'Blue Sky Mine', a protest song inspired by the experiences of Wittenoom asbestos mine workers.
1992	A Western Australian parliamentary inquiry into asbestos issues at Wittenoom recommended that tailings at the mine site be cleaned up over a 5 to 10-year period. Those recommendations were not implemented.
1994	The Select Committee into Wittenoom recommended remediation of mining sites, development of alternative tourism sites and alternative road access to Karijini National Park. Engineering work was later focused on options for the former Wittenoom townsite only.
2006	The GHD and Parsons Brinckerhoff report found that Aboriginal people, tourists, workers and other user groups could continue to be exposed to asbestos fibres. It also found that asbestos wastes had spread through wind and water and that contamination would continue to spread if not managed.
2007	The former Wittenoom townsite was officially degazetted.
2008	The Wittenoom area was classified as a contaminated site under the <i>Contaminated Sites Act 2003</i> (Government of Western Australia 2003), and the Wittenoom Asbestos Management Area was established.
2014	The Banjima people obtained a final native title determination over parts of Banjima Country, including areas affected by asbestos contamination.
2015	The Western Australian Government commissioned further assessment of encapsulation and remediation options, with estimated costs reported at approximately AUD 150 million. Comprehensive remediation did not proceed at that time.
2022	The <i>Wittenoom Closure Act 2022</i> (Government of Western Australia 2022) facilitated the compulsory acquisition of remaining private land in the former Wittenoom townsite. The last remaining resident left the townsite that year.
2023	Remaining structures in the former Wittenoom townsite were demolished and buried as part of the town closure process.

In 2006, the Western Australian Government commissioned GHD and Parsons Brinckerhoff (PB) to assess the management requirements of asbestos contamination from the Yampire, Wittenoom and Colonial mines. GHD & PB (2006) estimated that over 150,000 tonnes of asbestos were extracted during this time, with 3 million tonnes of residual tailings left after processing ceased, which still contain approximately 5% asbestos. These tailings are mostly located within the Yampire and Colonial Gorges. Figure 3 and Figure 4 show asbestos tailings at Wittenoom.



Figure 3 Unrehabilitated asbestos tailings at Wittenoom (photo credit Maurice Blackburn)



Figure 4 Unrehabilitated asbestos tailings at Wittenoom (photo credit Illuminate Films)

Through the life of the mine, asbestos tailings were used in the construction of the Wittenoom town, Wittenoom airstrip and amenities. These asbestos tailings were also used for construction of roads, and potentially other built infrastructure on the nearby Mulga Downs Pastoral Station. Many Banjima people lived and worked on Mulga Downs.

The Wittenoom Asbestos Management Area was established in 2008 following the assessment by GHD & PB (2006). The town of Wittenoom was degazetted in June 2007, with the last 14 free hold lots compulsorily acquired through the *Wittenoom Closure Act 2022*. The purpose of the *Wittenoom Closure Act 2022* was to demolish all remaining structures and reduce the human health exposures posed by the area (Government of Western Australia 2022).

The Wittenoom asbestos mine remains unrehabilitated approximately 60 years after operations ceased. The area is commonly described as one of the largest contaminated sites in the southern hemisphere (Macmath 2019), with a government-mandated exclusion zone of more than 46,000 hectares.

6 Continuing impacts of the asbestos contamination on Banjima Country

6.1 Health impacts

More than 3 million tonnes of asbestos tailings remain exposed in waste dumps and along the gorge walls where asbestos mining occurred. Figure 5 shows an asbestos danger sign at Wittenoom. These tailings continue to move through wind, water and human activity, spreading contamination across Banjima Country, towards the Fortescue River and creating ongoing risks for people, animals and the environment (JBS&G 2023). Inhalation of asbestos fibres can cause fatal diseases including asbestosis, mesothelioma and lung cancer, often after a latency period of 20 to 40 years. More than 2,000 former workers, residents and affected community members have died from asbestos-related disease linked to Wittenoom, including Banjima people (Asbestos Diseases Society of Australia [ADSA] 2026).

The toll on families who care for loved ones with asbestos-related disease is profound. That trauma has been compounded by difficulties accessing compensation, long delays in public action, and the continuing absence of a comprehensive remediation response.



Figure 5 Danger sign at Wittenoom abandoned mine site (photo credit State Library of Western Australia)

6.2 Environmental spread

From an environmental perspective, drainage lines from the Wittenoom Gorge spread out and become braided where they flow across the alluvial fans of the Lower Fortescue River Valley, not always following a preferential path (Hancock Prospecting Pty Ltd 2024). These drainage lines transport asbestos further from the original mine site over time, outside of the exclusion zone (JBS&G 2023). The steepness of the tailings and the undercutting by stream action is serving to feed asbestos material into the Fortescue River catchment that will continue, if unchecked, for hundreds of years (GHD & PB 2006).

6.3 Cultural, spiritual and native title impacts

The government-mandated exclusion zones at the Wittenoom and Yampire Asbestos Management Areas (Figure 1) have effectively locked Banjima out of their own Country. This has prevented Banjima people from fully accessing important ceremonial sites and exercising their native title rights, which are already severely hampered by most of Banjima Country being covered by mining and exploration tenements. The contamination of land not only impacts physical health, but also cultural and spiritual connection to the land. This issue is not unique to Banjima Country, and is recognised on other Indigenous lands in Australia (Burton et al 2024; Reeves et al. 2025) and internationally (Boulot & Collins 2023).

6.4 Social and economic impacts

The closure of the Wittenoom township, removal of services and loss of local tourism activity have also affected Banjima and other local communities. The school, hospital and police station were relocated to Tom Price, and the airport was also removed. Similar pressures have affected Mulga Downs Station at the time, which is now the location of a proposed new iron ore mine.

6.5 Global significance and remediation complexity

As a contaminated site, Wittenoom is globally unusual because it combines:

- large geographic footprint
- highly toxic material
- diffuse, uncontrollable spread
- long latency human impact.

This combination is unusual and difficult to manage. Although Wittenoom is smaller than some global contamination zones, its dispersed asbestos contamination, long disease latency and cultural impacts make remediation complex and urgent. The contamination also raises issues under Article 29 of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (United Nations 2007), which provides that hazardous materials should not be stored or disposed of on Indigenous lands without free, prior and informed consent. The affected area is also close to the Karijini Eco Retreat, a popular tourism destination.

7 A personal journey: living with the legacy of Wittenoom

Aboriginal people have been among those affected by asbestos-related disease arising from Wittenoom. Elders have passed away at a time when they should have been passing on knowledge, and younger generations continue to live with concern about diseases that may take decades to appear. For many Banjima families, asbestos is not a historical issue; it remains a present and personal reality.

The health impacts of Wittenoom continue to affect the Banjima community decades after mining ceased. A 2016 epidemiological study reported that Aboriginal people in Western Australia have experienced the highest recorded mortality rate from malignant mesothelioma internationally, with approximately two-thirds of Aboriginal mesothelioma cases directly attributable to occupational or environmental exposure associated with the Wittenoom asbestos mine (Franklin et al. 2016). The long latency period of asbestos-related diseases means that new diagnoses continue to occur many years after exposure. The loss of Banjima Elders to

asbestos-related illness has reduced opportunities for the intergenerational transfer of cultural knowledge, while ongoing concern about future disease remains for many families. Consequently, asbestos is not simply a historical issue for the Banjima people but an enduring health, cultural and social legacy.

Maitland Parker was one of the Banjima people's most senior and respected Elders and a former Chair of BNTAC. Throughout his life, he advocated for the remediation of Wittenoom to protect future generations from ongoing asbestos exposure. In a departure from cultural tradition, he chose to publicly share his personal experience with mesothelioma to raise awareness of the continuing impacts of asbestos contamination. This advocacy culminated in the co-production of the multi-award-winning documentary YURLU (Illuminate Films 2026), named after the Banjima word for Country.

The documentary chronicles the final 2 years of Maitland Parker's life and documents his campaign for the remediation of Wittenoom. Although Maitland never worked at Wittenoom, he worked on Mulga Downs Station and later served as a Ranger in Karijini National Park from 1985, living at Ranger Headquarters for approximately 40 years. His enduring objective was to see Wittenoom remediated so that future generations of Banjima people could safely return to and reconnect with their Country.

Maitland even took his concerns on Wittenoom to the United Nations, in 2023 meeting with the UN Special Rapporteur on the Human Right to a Healthy Environment. Following on from this, Maitland's niece, Johnelle Parker, travelled to Geneva to again meet with the UN Special Rapporteur during the 61st Regular Session of the Human Rights Council to further raise awareness and advocate for the clean-up and healing of Country.

8 Seeking accountability: Banjima legal action for Wittenoom remediation

Banjima Country has been significantly affected by asbestos mining at Wittenoom and Yampire and by the prolonged absence of comprehensive remediation. As a consequence, Banjima people have experienced ongoing health risks and restrictions on accessing culturally significant places and exercising native title rights. The continued presence and dispersal of asbestos contamination have resulted in environmental, cultural, social and health impacts that remain unresolved.

In response, BNTAC, on behalf of the Banjima people, has commenced legal proceedings against the State of Western Australia. The proceedings seek, among other remedies:

- remediation of the 3 principal asbestos tailings dumps to eliminate, or substantially reduce, the ongoing risk of asbestos fibre dispersal for future generations
- compensation to Banjima for the past and continuing impacts of asbestos contamination associated with Wittenoom
- findings in relation to responsibility for the creation and ongoing management of the Wittenoom asbestos hazard
- compensation and appropriate support for Banjima people affected by the consequences of asbestos exposure, including those who develop asbestos-related disease.

Gordon Legal is acting on behalf of BNTAC and Banjima people in these proceedings. For the Banjima people, the litigation represents the culmination of many years of advocacy for the remediation of Wittenoom following decades of unresolved asbestos contamination.

9 Conclusion

The Wittenoom and Yampire Asbestos Management Areas are not only contaminated sites, but they also represent an unresolved environmental justice, cultural heritage, native title and public health failure. For Banjima people, the impacts of asbestos mining have not ended with the closure of the mines or the removal of the former township. They continue through the ongoing spread of asbestos fibres, the loss of safe access

to Country, the destruction and restriction of cultural places, and the intergenerational grief and fear carried by families affected by asbestos-related disease.

Despite decades of warnings, reports and recommendations, the tailings remain unrehabilitated and continue to present risks to people, animals, waterways and Country. The Wittenoom legacy demonstrates the consequences of decisions made without Traditional Owner participation, without adequate regard for public health, and without long-term accountability for environmental harm. It also demonstrates the limits of simply excluding people from contaminated landscapes when those landscapes are living Country, holding ancestral, cultural and spiritual obligations that cannot be abandoned.

For Banjima, remediation is not only a technical exercise, it must be guided by Banjima governance, informed by cultural authority, and supported by transparent funding, long-term monitoring, health support and recognition of cultural loss and native title impacts. Any future response must prioritise the clean-up and containment of the principal tailings sources, prevent further spread of contamination, and restore the possibility for Banjima people to safely access, care for and practise culture on their Country.

The litigation against the State of Western Australia is therefore not simply a legal claim. It is part of a broader struggle for recognition, accountability and the healing of Country. More than 60 years after mining ceased, the impacts of asbestos contamination remain unresolved, and the asbestos continues to spread. The Wittenoom legacy demonstrates that remediation of contaminated landscapes cannot be separated from the rights, responsibilities and cultural connections of the Traditional Owners whose Country has been affected. Achieving lasting outcomes will require genuine partnership with Banjima people, sustained commitment to remediation, and recognition of the enduring environmental, cultural and health consequences of asbestos contamination.

Acknowledgement

We acknowledge the Banjima Traditional Owners of the Country on which this work is centred. We recognise the ongoing leadership of Banjima Elders and community members who continue to advocate for the rehabilitation of abandoned mine sites, the protection of Country, the exercising of native title rights, and improved outcomes for future generations.

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