

## Fees a bonus for big-money Kakadu officials



*Kakadu National Park.*

---

Amos Aikman  
Northern Correspondent

---

- March 2, 2021

A company representing Kakadu traditional owners paid out hundreds of thousands of dollars in sitting fees on top of the five- and six-figure salaries earned by some of its officeholders, documents reveal.

Gundjeihmi Aboriginal Corporation operated a structure in which certain directors were also employees. Key figures took home annual pay-packets of as much as \$237,000 and were also paid for meetings held as frequently as fortnightly.

Gundjeihmi has been under investigation by the federal Office of the Registrar of Indigenous Corporations following whistleblower complaints and a September 2019 raid in which police and ORIC staff seized more than 11,000 documents.

Gundjeihmi previously handled large sums in annual royalties from the Ranger uranium mine and is now involved in the federal and Northern Territory governments' multi-million-dollar Kakadu redevelopment plans.

The raid of Gundjeihmi's Jabiru headquarters, east of Darwin, concerned offences allegedly committed by six people who were directors or officeholders in the period 2012-16, according to a note in Gundjeihmi's most-recent accounts.

### **Sitting Fees**

SITTING	12/05/2015 ...	\$375.00
MEETING	26/05/2015 ...	\$750.00
MEETING	26/05/2015 ...	\$1,200.00
SITTING	12/06/2015 ...	\$400.00
MEETING	23/06/2015 ...	\$600.00

### **An extract of a schedule of sitting fees paid by Gundjeihmi**

The Australian last week revealed that ORIC is investigating claims senior Gundjeihmi figures conspired to award each other huge pay increases and abused entitlements. A senior executive allegedly charged thousands of dollars in speeding fines, travel and skiing lessons to the corporation's accounts.

Further documents show that between July 2010 and June 2016, Gundjeihmi paid almost \$500,000 in sitting, meeting and other fees to a small group of people, including several listed as directors. At least three of the people who received sitting fees were also employees. It appears that those who attended meetings were initially paid a uniform rate of about \$219 per event. But over time, discrepancies emerged so that some attendees received more — up to \$1200 — while others got less.

Payroll slips for three of the people more generously compensated in meeting records show that they were also paid salaries of \$90,000 to \$237,000 in the 2016 financial year, meaning at least one collected at least three times the national average wage. Indigenous leader and Australian Institute of Company Directors not-for-profit committee member Warren Mundine said having employees as directors was unusual and that it was “unheard of” for salaried staff to also receive sitting fees.

“The board is supposed to be there to ensure the proper management of the company. There's a conflict — a big conflict — if directors are also employees,” he said. “No one who's on a salary should be getting sitting fees ... that (meeting) is their job.”

Mr Mundine said he had seen cases where the payment of sitting fees incentivised groups to meet more often than was needed, adding that paying such fees at different rates was “ridiculous” and should raise “serious questions” about governance. Gundjeihmi's rule book, lodged with ORIC in 2010, says directors are “not paid unless they are employees ... or ... have a contract to provide goods and services”.

Gundjeihmi chief executive Justin O'Brien declined to answer specific questions but said the documents shown to The Australian were confidential and should not be published as they presented “an unfair characterisation of the affairs of the corporation”.

Amos Aikman  
Northern Correspondent