

Reuters

June 11, 2009

URL:<http://www.reuters.com/article/lifestyleMolt/idUSTRE55A05U20090611?pageNumber=2&virtualBrandChannel=10530>



REUTERS

## Aboriginal kids get free laptops to fight illiteracy

---

Thu Jun 11, 2009 6:40am EDT

[Email](#) | [Print](#) | [Share](#) | [Reprints](#) | [Single Page](#)

By [James Regan](#)

ELCHO ISLAND, Australia (Reuters) - Soon after getting a green laptop distributed free to Aboriginal school children in hopes of combating illiteracy and truancy, Jericho Lacey learned his computer was good for more than just homework.



From his home on Elcho Island, an impoverished tropical outpost, Lacey writes school essays and occasionally plays "maze games" and surfs the net.

"Hopefully, my children will become digitally connected to the rest of the world," Jericho's father Marcus told Reuters. "This island is not very close to anything."

In the middle of the Arafura Sea and about 2,000 kms (1,200 miles) northwest of Sydney, the former Methodist mission island is no paradise for its inhabitants.

Peanut and banana farming was abandoned decades ago, leaving little or no work on the island for the 2,000 or so adults.

Alcohol is banned to stem domestic violence and cars run on a type of petrol that can't be inhaled after gasoline sniffing became a popular and dangerous past-time for the island's youth. Pornography is also banned on the island.

Organizers behind the program hope to combat the monotony of island life with new-found interests such as surfing the net and offering the 1,200 school-age children opportunities to learn of the world beyond the dense mangrove swamps that surround the sea.

"We're trying to give these kids a shot they might not otherwise get growing up here," said Barry Vercoe, who heads the Asia-Pacific arm of One Laptop Per Child, an international charity he says has so far given away 1.5 million computers.

To date, about 2,000 laptops have been delivered to three schools in indigenous communities in Australia, where illiteracy can be multi-generational and English hardly, if ever, spoken.

The charity was founded by Nicholas Negroponte, a Massachusetts Institute of Technology researcher, and has given computers to school-age children as far afield as Cambodia, Rwanda and Papua New Guinea.

Through private donations and corporate sponsorships Vercoe hopes to donate 400,000 computers in Australia over the next two or three years, all directly to indigenous school children.

"When we have the opportunity to inoculate against ignorance and illiteracy we must take it," Vercoe said.

Studies indicate that illiteracy among Aboriginal children has long been underestimated. A report by education ministers in Australia estimates one in three indigenous third grade students failed to meet a minimum



reading standard established by the government for all Australians.

Australia is less than two years into a nationwide initiative to intervene in

communities heavily populated by Aboriginals, in some instances sending in police and the army to enforce alcohol bans and conduct health checks for children.

A report by the Australian Education Union commissioned to examine government intervention in the Northern Territory found that about \$1.6 billion is needed to ensure Aboriginal students have the same opportunities as non-Aboriginal students.

## **HARDY COMPUTERS**

Designed by Taiwanese company Quanta and manufactured in Shanghai, each rugged XO computer costs \$185 and is coated in thick rubber to withstand harsh conditions.



A wireless router enables children to connect with teachers via the Internet. They feature a high-resolution display that can be read in direct sunlight and are known for their low power consumption, operating up to 12 hours on a single battery charge.

At the island's Shepherdson College, where daily attendance for the children from pre-school age through high school is less than 50 percent, according to the school's principal, Bryan Hughes, a desire to preserve local Aboriginal culture and language threatens to clash with the introduction of new learning tools imported from the mainland.

"On the one hand, we're saying: 'Here, take this computer'. It is yours alone to keep'," said a teacher at Shepherdson College. "At the same time, traditional Aboriginal culture here is much less tied to the notion of individual ownership," he said.

Differences in lifestyles among Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians are at the center of the educational and economic divides between the groups.

It was 1967 before changes in the federal constitution recognized Aboriginal people as Australian citizens with equal rights to vote.

Before that, they were simply protected under the same laws governing plants and animals.

Traditions of communal ownership still far outweigh the right to hold individual possessions among many Aboriginal settlements.

Vercoe concedes this could be an obstacle.

"Once we give a child a computer, we say it's yours for life," he said. "That concept can butt up against some of the traditional values, he said."

Mixing English with Djambarrpuyngu, one of nearly two-dozen regional languages, 10-year-old Naomi Ruluminy Dhurrkay struggles with essay writing on her new computer, but marvels at what else it can do: "I mostly like the Internet and the talking stories," she said.

Gary Barnes, an administrator from Australia's Northern Territory Department of Education, said the arrival of personal computers on the island can help teachers but is no cure-all.

"These are not silver bullets and on their own they will not make huge differences," Barnes said.

Nonetheless, said another teacher at the local school, Dianne Dickinson, "Our students enjoy using them, which is a start."