



**HD** **Karratha: a town trying to find balance on the boom-bust scale**

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When we talk about **mining**, it's hard to look past the Pilbara in Western Australia.

Rich in **iron ore**, the region is the hub of exports to **China** and a significant contributor to both state and federal taxes.

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A little over 1500 kilometres north of Perth, Karratha sits on the Pilbara coast and is the gateway to much of the region.

The town is the epitome of Australia's **iron ore** boom, built in the 1960s on the back of the growth of Hamersley **iron**.

When land ran out in the seaside town of Dampier, a new regional hub was created at Karratha.

But a move from construction to production on several major projects over the past 18 months has left many wondering if Karratha's boom is over.

Terry Swetman has lived in Karratha for 42 years and has seen the town transform from a tight-knit outback community into a bustling hub, filled with fluoro shirts and four wheel drives.

"The town back then was divided into blocks A, **B**, C, D, E, F and G and where you lived depended where you worked," Mr Swetman said.

"My dad worked at the power station so we lived in C-block.

"We were all very close, everybody knew everybody and we all get on very well."

Growing up in Karratha, Mr Swetman remembers crossing paths with the legendary Red Dog, an infamous red cattle dog who's life was captured in a movie with the same name.

"He was an icon in our town and as a young fella we saw him every now and then.

"If you took the bus, you didn't sit behind the driver because that was the dog's seat.

"I made the mistake of sitting there as an apprentice one day and certainly got told off by the dog that it was his seat and I had to move pretty quick!"

Mr Swetman says there was a discernible change in the town's population size with the arrival of Woodside.

"Where the truck stop is out of town you could easily see a lot of tents, cars, campers and people sleeping out there because there was just no accommodation in town," he said.

"Then the transportable camps came into town and if you went to hotels and pubs it was always crowded and we realised it was ramping up.

"It started to look a lot different to what it used to be."

While Karratha may look different these days, Mr Swetman thinks the town will always be known for **mining**.

"It was founded on **mining**, we've got Dampier Salt, the Hamersley **iron** expansion and the town is here for that whole industry, so I don't think we'll ever lose that status."

One of Karratha's iconic sites is the gas flare that glows at night from the Burrup Peninsula.

The Burrup is home to both some of the world's oldest rock art and one of the country's largest natural gas developments.

From a town founded on **iron ore**, Karratha lived through another boom with the development of Woodside's liquefied natural gas project, Pluto.

However, as construction wrapped up and Pluto moved into production, fewer workers were needed on-site.

For local hairdressing salon owner Helen, that has translated to a downturn in business.

"I came here two years ago and the town was absolutely buzzing and pumping. I'd go to the shops and feel like I was out of dress-code because I wasn't wearing high-vis," she said.

"I worked in the mall at the time and we were turning people away left, right and centre."

Inspired by the boom in business she saw, Helen decided to open her own salon 12 months ago but the buzz around town has since died down.

"As the year has progressed I've noticed there are fewer and fewer people.

"I lost about 30 families last year because they were either made redundant or had to switch to fly-in-fly-out, so that was really sad."

Helen has three senior staff and an apprentice, and when we catch up on a Thursday afternoon most of the salon chairs are empty.

She says a drop in business and a scheduled rent rise for her salon are real concerns for the salon's long term viability.

"I sort of wonder now, did I make the right call.

"I'm not going to chuck in the towel just yet, I'll wait it out and see what happens, but I thought being in a **mining** town that there'd be a bigger turn over."

Helen isn't the only local who has noticed things seem a little quieter.

John runs a coffee van on the highway heading out of Karratha.

In the pre-dawn light, there is always a long queue of reflective vests waiting for their caffeine hit.

John has lived in town for 27 years and says he has noticed the last 12 months have not been as busy.

"Yeah it's a bit quiet, I think most businesses in town would have noticed that.

"If you go up to the shopping centre now you'll see it's really quiet, whereas once upon a time it was quite mad."

John feels the town is currently experiencing a plateau but he remains hopeful things will pick up again.

"Lots of people have their cars for **sale** on Dreamer's Hill.

"But we're coming into that time of year when a lot of the big companies do their shut downs, so we'll have quite a few people come into town for that."

One local who is still living the boom is Dayne. His family runs a local earthmoving **company**.

The **company** has worked on some of the town's biggest projects and is currently contracted to work on a new waste management facility.

Dayne says he and his brothers anticipated the 'slow down' and they are capitalising on it.

"We worked on the philosophy that winter was our season, in terms of the economic winter.

"We did a lot of capital injection when things were booming, we got our **company** structures in order and developed our equipment to make sure we got the best out of the so-called downturn."

While many small businesses in Karratha have had to downsize in recent months, Dayne says they have been hiring.

"We've taken on seven or eight people so far this year and all our workforce is local.

"We probably have about 50 people spread among the two companies now and I'm hoping that will grow."

Hiring and training locals, as opposed to employing ready-trained fly-in-fly-out workers, is an important distinction for Dayne.

He believes local workers ensure a more committed and happier workforce in the long term.

"The age of the overnight **millionaire** is over, that's a mentality that has to change in this town.

"I think that if Karratha had kept going the way it was going during the boom period, I think we would've imploded on ourselves and not survived."

The rebranding of Karratha, from a fly-in-fly-out hub to a family-friendly town has been underway for some time.

Late last year a street party was held to open Karratha's new town centre and main street and although many of the new shopfronts still sit empty, the face-lift is something the Shire of Roebourne is proud of.

Shire CEO, Chris Adams, believes in the WA government's vision for this town as a Pilbara City, with a population of 50,000 by 2035.

He doesn't buy into the argument that Karratha's hey day has passed.

"Well if this is a bust, long live the bust, things are going pretty well here."

Chris acknowledges that things seem a little quieter but he says Karratha is experiencing a typical transition in the business cycle.

"There has been a slight slowdown but everyone knew it was coming, it hasn't been a surprise to anybody.

"People who have been here for the last 20 or 30 years know that we have construction activity and then operational activity."

He argues Karratha is a port rather than **mining** town, and as such, has a secure future ahead of it.

"Mines come and go but the port will be here forever so there is a long term future for Karratha.

"The difference with Karratha is we're not just a one trick pony.

"We've got **oil** and gas, we've got things like the ammonium nitrate plant, we've got logistics and we've got a significant port.

"There is enough economic activity for the town to survive post any boom or bust."

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