

# Narrogin Observer's Country roads



An organisation with a big social conscience has an ambitious plan to build a utopian farm community in WA, possibly at Narrogin. The project is the brainchild of a Narrogin man who talks here to SIMON PENN...

Narrogin resident Jack Smit's ambitious plan is to build an eco-friendly farm to serve as a haven for a wide range of community groups.

## 'I have a dream'

"WANTED: Big plot of land suitable for agriculture, housing asylum seekers, international tourists and hosting school camps. Oh, and could we please have it for free?"

It may sound an ambitious ask but that is exactly what an association named Project SafeCom is looking for.

The project is the brainchild of Narrogin man Jack Smit, who dreams of establishing "a safe community in Western Australia for people of any race, gender, creed or nationality, who are displaced as a result of wars or political, social, climatological, ecological and geological upheaval and/or disaster, and for other users as and when appropriate".

This utopian community would also be a working farm, run according to strict environmental guidelines.

The group hopes to be either given the land for the project by the Government or a benefactor, or to buy or lease it for a minimal amount.

Project SafeCom was incorporated as a non-profit association at the end of last year and is run by a six-person steering committee, headed by Mr Smit, and includes a former Greens Party candidate from Queensland, an Aboriginal liaison officer and people with experience in aged and disability care.

Now 49 years of age, Mr Smit moved to Narrogin more than two years ago after spending 20 years living on and off in Perth.

Having never been to Narrogin before, but deciding he'd had enough of living in the city, Mr Smit drove down one day in November 1999, liked the look of the town, found a house and has lived here ever since.

"I came to Narrogin to escape the mortgage trap and to have my own sea-change — Perth isn't the oversized village it was when I first went there 20 years ago," he said.

Born and raised in Holland, Mr Smit emigrated to Australia in the early 1980s, attracted in part by the free tertiary education available at the time.

Once in Perth he undertook a degree in social work. He has since spent much of his time involved in it as a vocation, but has developed his own ideas in response to misgivings with traditional techniques.

"My favourite saying is that 'I was educated as a social worker, but I got over it'," he said.

"Mainstream social work has a tendency to label people and put them in boxes to treat them."

His recent employment has included tutoring Aboriginal students

in bridging courses at Edith Cowan University, teaching at TAFE colleges and working as a researcher with Roy Morgan.

A lot of his previous work has been in developing employment creation schemes, including working in Fitzroy Crossing and Port Hedland with Aboriginal people entering the

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mining industry.

But when it comes to Project SafeCom Mr Smit admits freely to having no farming expertise whatsoever.

"Part of the plan is to have a farm manager who would work under the direction of the steering committee, but who would also advise the committee," he said.

"Profit does not come first, it does not come before animals or plants or the welfare of the soil."

The farm would use rotating,

small-scale crops in an effort to maintain the integrity of the soil and opposition to chemical fertilisation and genetic modification.

Alternative techniques of animal husbandry would preclude anything conceived as cruel, including crutching, docking, drenching or branding. Water, and its efficient collection and use would also play a pivotal part.

Mr Smit said incorporation of the asylum seekers issue into the project "was born out of a fury with the way things are in Australia at the moment".

"We want to have a strong social justice voice in Australia, which is where the refugee issue comes in," he said.

Mr Smit said the farm would give refugees a decent place to live while they were being processed, while at the same time allowing them to work and make a contribution to the community.

Mr Smit said Narrogin was his preferred location to establish the project, but he would be willing to take it to any suitable site he was offered.

He believed the venture would bring many benefits to the town if it were situated here.

As well as its humanitarian goals,

it aims to attract paying visitors from around WA, Australia and the world, and would also look to work with local school and community groups.

Mr Smit is wary of the precedent set in other areas of Australia where similar projects have set themselves apart from, or even at odds with, the communities around them.

He didn't want the project to be seen as separate from the community, but to be integrated:

"We would like to be one of the most loved projects in the area," he said.

The biggest hurdle is obviously the acquisition of the land, and the group's sales pitch is in the fine-tuning stage.

A big believer in the power of the Internet as a communication tool, Mr Smit has utilised it to rally support for the farm and now for refugees.

Mr Smit has created The Australian People's Refugee Visa — an online protest paper and petition. He reports endorsements from a big number of individuals, organisations and even politicians. The SafeCom website, and links to the refugee visa, are at [www.safecom.org](http://www.safecom.org).

Despite the apparent enormity of his project, Mr Smit says he is 100 per cent confident of success.

He certainly dreams on a grand scale and only time will tell whether his ambitious project will spread its wings and fly.