Ernie Grant, Honorary Doctor of Letters

Well known local Ernie Grant was awarded an Honorary Doctor of Letters by James Cook University in a ceremony at the Cairns Convention Centre.

The award is in recognition of Mr Grant's outstanding service to the Northern Queensland community.

... HISTORY...

Ernie Grant was born on February 1, 1935, to John and Chloe Grant, of the Jirrbal people, at Murray Upper just to the south of Tully.

His parents had ambitious hopes for their children and spoke English with them in the home as well as their own language, Jirrbal.

At first denied entry to the Murray Upper school, under a 'whites only' policy, Mr Grant and his sister were admitted when enrolments fell below the required minimum to keep the school open. Once at school, Mr Grant voraciously consumed all the knowledge the school could offer, a passion that has continued throughout his life and which encompasses botany, zoology, geography, geology and history.

From his teen years on, Mr Grant worked with his father and elder brother as a timber-getter, spending his spare time and money studying for a private pilot's licence.

When he was told an Aboriginal man would never get such a licence, it only made him more determined to succeed.

In 1963, RMW Dixon, a Research Officer for the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, was investigating the Indigenous languages of the Cairns rainforest region.

Mr Grant addressed a meeting of elders and provided arguments as to why they should have their language recorded, documented and analysed by the young linguist.

Mr Grant's mother Chloe was deputed by the Jirrbal people to be Dixon's main teacher.

In breaks from language work, the linguist would help Mr Grant with the trigonometry he was working on for his pilot's licence.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, Mr Grant was manager of a timber company in Papua New Guinea and became exposed to the complex language situation there.

This led him to re-assess the value of his own linguistic heritage, which was rapidly ebbing away. After returning home in 1973, and while working on the railways, he began studying his traditional culture, conversing with the older members of his community and recording their stories.

In 1989, Mr Grant became Community Education Counsellor at Tully High School.

In co-operation with Annette Kraski and RMW Dixon, he initiated and devised a semester unit on Aboriginal Culture and Language which was taught to Grade 8 at the Tully High School each year from 1990.

Versions of the syllabus were adopted for use in other schools within the area.

This unit achieved a tremendous amount in teaching white children - and sometimes their parents - about the richness and complexity of Aboriginal life, as well as allowing Aboriginal students to re-engage with their heritage.

Throughout his life Ernie Grant has been helping his people as they come to terms with living within the wider Australian society.

With a keen sense of history, he has devoted much attention to recording traditional laws and legends, and collected accounts of past massacres, which he has turned into the draft of a book.

In 1991, Mr Grant was appointed Cultural Research Officer within the Queensland Department of Education, based in Cairns.

For the next dozen and more years he worked tirelessly to educate the people of North Queensland about Aboriginal cultural traditions and values.

He has developed and catalogued a comprehensive collection of local historical information with respect to his people, and has traced the movement of the local Aboriginal peoples of Northern Queensland and the life of the local Aboriginal communities through the food sources that became available.

A major achievement of the past few years has been the initiation and development of the Echo Creek Cultural Centre just south of Tully, which is regularly visited by students from primary and secondary schools and tertiary institutions across northern Queensland.

Now a respected elder of the Jirrbal people, Mr Grant provides advice, adjudicates in disputes, and sees that the correct course of action is followed, and his influence is felt far beyond his own ancestral group.
PROUD MOMENT: It was a great mark of respect when Ernie Grant was awarded an Honorary Doctor of Letters by James Cook University.