



Hostel owners deny group's expulsion

Natasha Robinson

THE owners of an Alice Springs hostel have denied asking a group of female Aboriginal lifesavers to leave because Japanese backpackers had found them "scary".

However, Adventure Travel Australia said it was "disappointed and sorry" for the distress suffered by the 16 women, who insist they were asked to leave the Haven Backpackers Resort.

The women from the remote community of Yuendumu were told by a manager that they were "unsuitable" guests and were asked to leave shortly after checking in last Saturday, because Japanese tourists were "afraid of Aboriginal people".

"They said it was because we were Aboriginal. Other customers were making complaints that they were scared of us," Bethany Langdon said yesterday. "I felt like I wanted to cry because it made me feel like I wasn't an Australian."

The group was part of a leadership program at Mount Theo, an out station of Yuendumu, and their visit to Alice Springs was organised by Royal LifeSaver Australia.

The travel company said yesterday it

had conducted a detailed investigation into the incident.

Joint owner Greg Zammit confirmed that the hostel manager had received complaints from international backpackers about the Aboriginal group.

"The manager was unable to allay the backpackers' concerns and offered to move the backpackers to other accommodation," Mr Zammit said. "The lifesaving group was not asked to move."

It was his understanding that it was the Aboriginal women themselves who had decided to leave the hostel. "An organiser with the lifesaving group told the manager that they felt uncomfortable and they wanted to leave," he said.

"As owners, we are disappointed and sorry for the upset and embarrassment this situation has caused the young Aborigines and their companions."

One of the girls on the trip, Sherelle Young, 15, said her treatment at the hostel was devastating. "I felt very sad," she said. "I felt like I was a lonely little dog. I felt I had no hope any more. I was about to cry. This is the first time in my entire life anything like this has happened."

The Northern Territory's anti-discrimination commissioner, Tony Fitzgerald, said yesterday the incident at the hostel was not isolated.

"If the story is true, it's disgraceful, but it is not the only story exactly like this that we have heard anecdotally at the commission," he said.

"The challenge for us is to convince people who do suffer this sort of unfair treatment to make a complaint so that we can investigate it and follow it through."

Mr Fitzgerald also used the incident to urge the NT Government to set up anti-discrimination office in Alice Springs.

"At the moment, the Government won't fund us to run a branch," Mr Fitzgerald told ABC radio. "But we need people on the ground in Alice to promote the issues, promote tolerance, promote respect, talk about what people's rights and responsibilities are. We can't do it on the phone from Darwin."

Ms Langdon said last night the women still intended to pursue an anti-discrimination complaint.



***Asked to leave:** Youth worker Amelia Watson, left, Kiara Langdon, Bethany Langdon, Sherelle Young, Michaeline Wilson, Gina Spencer and Enid Gallagher **Picture: Liam Campbell**