**Remote switch:** Gerhardt Pearson says videoconferencing removes the need for long and arduous trips to stay in touch in the far north

# Walkabout gives way to talkabout

**Ean Higgins**
● Videoconferencing

FOR Gerhardt Pearson to fly from Cairns to the remote Cape York Aboriginal community of Kowanyama would take over two hours, not to mention the cost.

"For the price we'd be able to fly to Bali and have some fun and some change in our pockets," said Mr Pearson, the executive director of the Balkanu Cape York Development Corp.

An alternative would be a grinding, eight to 10-hour drive — when the roads are open.

One way that Balkanu, and the remote communities like Kowanyama whose interests it promotes, are trying to do at least some business more cheaply and faster is through videoconferencing.

A program started early last year has now been rolled out to 12 communities in Cape York, under the auspices of a division of Balkanu called the Cape York Digital Network, and should be completed by October with 16 communities online.

The Cape York project, which also includes internet and computer access in community centres, started with a $5.2 million Commonwealth grant under the Networking the Nation scheme.

The Cape York network is in turn part of the Outback Digital Network, which covers five indigenous-owned regional services across northern Australia.

The videoconferencing equipment will be rolled out to communities in the Northern Territory and Western Australia next year with a further $10.7 million grant, ultimately covering a quarter of the country from Broome to Cairns.

ODN plans to become self-financing, with Aboriginal community members receiving a subsidised rate but government and businesses paying commercial usage rates.

> ## 'Videoconferencing is a very important resource to the community'
>
> **Gerhardt Pearson**
> Executive director, Balkanu Cape York Development Corp

"It has been well received and is a very important resource to the community on the Cape," Mr Pearson said.

Balkanu hopes videoconferencing can be used to help develop a range of small businesses, including ecotourism.

By linking up to computers, businesses can display spreadsheets and documents during the course of a videoconference meeting with, for example, financial backers.

Data on the expansion of videoconferencing in Australia is hard to come by, but industry figures say it has been huge, prompted in part by a radical decline in price over the past decade.

"The increase in units has been running at 30 per cent per annum," said Graham Williams, the managing director of videoconferencing provider Integrated Vision.

Mr Pearson argues that the technology his group uses — supplied by Polycom, whose starting prices range from about $900 for a small unit to $6000 for a full group videoconference system — has proved cost-effective.

"In Cape York there has been a higher than normal focus on doing business with the Commonwealth and state, meeting with bureaucrats, police and healthcare workers," he said.