

A PERSONAL PERSPECTIVE ON NATIONAL PARKS IN THE KIMBERLEY

Noel Nannup, who worked for six years as a ranger in Geikie Gorge National Park, spoke to Kimberley Society members on 21 September 1994 about his involvement with the Kimberley and its National Parks. He spoke of his formative years and how, in 1978, after 14 months' training with the National Parks Authority at Yanchep, he became the State's first Aboriginal Ranger. Work at Nambung followed, with a transfer to Geikie Gorge in 1981. Tony Start, based at Karratha, was Noel's boss and his only warning was that it would be hot and dusty!

Recalling his first trip to the Kimberley, Noel has vivid memories of the boabs, vast watercourses and tall river red gums of the Fitzroy River. His accommodation (the Sergeant's Quarters at old Fitzroy Crossing) left much to be desired, and his wife was horrified by the dirt and spiders that had accumulated since the previous tenants' departure. But Geikie Gorge made up for everything - it was magnificent with tall paper-barks lining the river, the immense cliffs ranging from grey to orange, and superb reflections in the still, mirror-like water.

As well as Geikie Gorge, Noel was also in charge of Tunnel Creek, Windjana Gorge and Wolfe Creek Crater, 9 hours driving away! What a challenge. He devoted his time to the tourists who came to view all this beauty, working an 18 hour day (with only 6 days off in the first 6 months) and learning to drive the boats before Vern Vagg, the boatman, arrived. A mobile ranger also arrived to help.

When the tourist numbers fell off, Noel went exploring and found that the local Aboriginal people were using the land as they always had, lighting fires where the National Park regulations stated no ground fires. So what to do? Tony Start was appealed to and said "You sort it out." So Noel approached these people, who said they'd keep the area clean and move out when the tourists came back in the dry - which they did - thus giving him their total support.

Tourism grew dramatically after Noel's arrival. In 1980, there were 13,000 boat passengers, and in 1981 there were 26,000. When he left in 1987 the numbers were up to 48,000 and the previous year's takings were \$105,000. By then, another mobile ranger helped with work load and a local station owner had been made an honorary warden to look after Wolfe Creek Crater.

A typical day went: up at 4 a.m., travel to Brooking Springs station to collect firewood for the camping area; check with other rangers that all was well; sell boat tickets and load passengers onto the pontoon every two hours for trips up the Gorge; clean showers and toilets; empty bins; clean out the BBQs; meet the returning boat and refuel it; grab lunch before the next tour; go in to town for mail

and to bank money collected; maintain the power generator for the house; and so on

Once the national parks were taken over by CALM, accountability led to the unannounced arrival of an auditor and the makings of a story that left the audience laughing heartily.

Noel's empathy with the local Aboriginal people induced him to suggest that they should be running the boat tours, and this year they have taken over that business. A question from the audience also drew the information that the Aboriginal Ranger Training Programme has resulted in individual rangers working at Purnululu (Bungle Bungle Range), Millstream and Karijini (Hamersley Range).

On a personal level, Noel told how the impact of the Kimberley enhanced his awareness of his Aboriginality and that he and his family subsequently sold all their assets so he could spend two and a half years in Canberra earning a diploma in Cultural Heritage Management. He has worked for the same length of time as CALM's Aboriginal Liaison Officer in Narrogin, and has recently been elected to the Town Council. These commitments, coupled with study of the Nyungar language, keep him very busy and the audience, in applauding his talk, was particularly appreciative of the effort he made in making the round trip from his Narrogin home to speak to the Society.

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