

MITCHELL PLATEAU - PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE

On 3 February 1999, Kevin Kenneally, our President, opened the first meeting of the new year with 87 members and friends present. Five speakers gave cameos of 10 minutes each on the subject of the Mitchell Plateau: Pat Vinnicombe - Aboriginal History; Joe Smith - Mining & the Campsite; Ron Johnstone - Birds; Kevin Kenneally - Plants; and Richard Hammond - The Future. People involved in the exploration campsite had been invited to bring slides, photographs and memorabilia, and these were displayed after the talks.

Dr Pat Vinnicombe

Dr Pat Vinnicombe, a retired anthropologist cum archaeologist and honorary research associate of the Berndt Museum of Anthropology, University of Western Australia, began by outlining the history of the Aboriginal people, the Wunambal, who lived on and around the Plateau. The family with custodial rights to the Mitchell Plateau are the Kandiwal tribe, members of the Wunambal language group. They believe that their land was created for them by their ancestral spirits and that they have been there forever.

Archaeologically, the earliest date so far obtained for Aboriginal presence on the Plateau is 6,170 years, based on an excavation by Bruce Veitch in a painted rock shelter. Since the dated sample was not from the lowest level of the deposit, however, first occupation of the shelter could be a lot older. There are also Gwion paintings (Bradshaws) in the shelter and the earliest Gwion images are estimated to be 17,000 years old.

The Wunambal traversed and lived on the Plateau and surrounding coast until 1942 when, because of the threat of Japanese invasion, they were moved by the government into missions at either Kalumburu to the north, or Kunmunya to the south, where their movements could be supervised. A group of Wunambal people that included three Kandiwal brothers, went back to their homeland with staff of the W.A. Museum in 1981, almost 40 years later, to conduct a heritage survey. The survey, in which Pat participated, was organised by Ian Crawford and financed by the mining company that had commenced exploration of the bauxite deposits on the Plateau in 1965. The vehicle tracks that had appeared since the Aboriginal people had last been there initially astounded and somewhat confused them because the tracks followed the ridge tops rather than the watercourses and valleys which were the favoured access routes in traditional times. Very soon, however, the Wunambal people used the vehicle tracks to good effect, and unerringly relocated the accessible sites of importance to them. Returning to their traditional country with their wives, children and grandchildren after so many years was extremely emotive for everyone.

Pat showed some interesting slides of their life on the Plateau. The Aboriginal people constructed small huts for shelter during the wet season, using bent saplings covered with grass. Circles or lines of anchor stones at the base is the only evidence of these structures still visible. There was a photograph of Wilfred Goonak, the senior custodian, making stone tools and grinding stones from locally available material. The sea faring Wunambal had an expert knowledge of the currents and tides, and exploited the offshore islands on rafts of light mangrove wood similar to those used by the Bardi in the Buccaneer Archipelago. The seasonal food resources were varied and plentiful, and included the hearts of *Livistona* palms. They dug for yams in the vine thickets, fished for bream and long-necked turtle in the creeks, speared dugongs and turtles in the sea and kangaroos and bush turkeys on the land. Wild beehives were chopped out for honey, leaving scars in the process which can still be recognised. Vast numbers of molluscs were collected from the mangroves, and some of the resultant piles of discarded shell have been excavated by Ph.D student Bruce Veitch, who has dated the lower levels of the middens to between 2000 and 3,500 years.

We also saw illustrations of the Wandjina site at Camp Creek—excavated by Bruce—where the Aboriginal people performed a ceremony when they visited the Plateau in 1981. The site contains paintings of a Wandjina with mythologically significant freshwater turtles (*Emydura* sp.). For the ceremony, the participants painted themselves with red stripes round their eyes, similar to the markings of the freshwater turtle, sang the rain song associated with the Wandjina, and stencilled the hands of their youngsters on the rock shelter wall.

Some of the shelters have burial material in them, with many of the bones rubbed with red ochre. After a death, stones were piled over the corpse, and the bones were later collected and taken to a final resting place in a rock shelter. The stone mounds in which the bodies were desiccated are roughly oval in shape with scattered stones inside, a feature often encountered on the Mitchell Plateau.

Indeed, on one of the last occasions that the Kandiwal brothers traversed the Plateau, their mother died and was covered in such a mound of stones. The intervention of the war meant that the final ritual of removing the bones to their appointed resting place was never carried out and the brothers were keen to put this right. Ian Crawford therefore flew with them in a helicopter in an attempt to identify the stone mound from the air, but without success. However, one of the sons of the deceased woman dreamed that the spirit of his mother had reached him in the helicopter, and he subsequently composed a song which had the effect of settling her spirit in the right place. The traditions of the Wunambal people on the Plateau are alive and well. Their land claim is being held at present.

Joe Smith

Joe Smith worked at the camp as a field assistant/mechanical plant operator from 1970-73 and again in 1978-79 (over the wet season). He was interested in the natural history of the area and made useful observations and collections for the WA Museum. He planted trees of African mahogany in 1970 and a trial plantation of native cypress (*Callitris intratropica*) to investigate its potential for timber export. Joe illustrated his talk with interesting historical slides. Camp Creek provided the original water source. For drilling they had a Fordson tractor on which was constructed an extension for shade due to the intense heat. A few of the men went up to Cape Bougainville to dig ore and transport it across to the crusher at Mitchell Plateau. They dug trenches and scraped down to the basalt on one of the scree slopes so that they could examine the geological profile of the ore body. Their supplies all came from Darwin by sea (on a barge) and were trucked in from the coast at Walsh Point.

Joe explored up the Lawley River in a dinghy and found good fishing there. In Rail Creek, which meanders through dense mangroves, he saw enormous crocodiles. He had slides of Surveyor's Pool in the wet, of balancing rocks and of three plants - *Xanthostemon*, *Crinum* (a large white lily), and a pink *Gossypium* related to cotton.

At the meeting, Joe was pleased to meet the visitors from early days on the Plateau, some of whom he hadn't seen for 30 years!

Ron Johnstone

The third speaker, Ron Johnstone, the Assistant Curator of Birds at the WA Museum of Natural History, was introduced to the Plateau by Joe Smith in 1970 when Joe offered his notes and sketches of birds, but no names. Ron told of going up with Laurie Smith in January-February 1972 on what he regards as his most important field trip ever. They collected more than 22 vertebrate species new to science, mostly reptiles and frogs and many new sub-species in what was considered ground-breaking natural history exploration.

Many of the birds found on the Plateau area were rare or had not been recorded since 1910 and details of their distribution, relative abundance, habitat preferences and breeding were poorly known. Some of the more interesting species were confined to the rugged sandstone areas including the black grasswren, sandstone shrikethrush and white-quilled rock pigeon and others such as the rainbow pitta, orange-legged scrubfowl and yellow figbird were confined to rainforest patches. Rail Creek on the Lawley River got its name from the four pairs of chestnut rails discovered there. The mangal at Port Warrender was one of the richest sites in the

world for mangrove birds with 25 species of bird recorded! These two zoologists also collected and recorded the reptiles and amphibians while there.

Mertens Falls was named after a famous herpetologist, Robert Mertens. Several skinks new to science were found and one named *Carlia amax* after the mining company who had done so much to make this survey possible, and another, *Carlia johnstoni* after Ron himself by Dr Glen Storr. *Carlia gracilis* has a green head. They found large geckoes common in sandstone caves and one *Gehyra xenopus*, an expert at hang gliding in fig trees at night. *Varanus mertensi*, known as the water monitor, was common along the creeks. *Pseudothecadactylus cavaticus* was 20 cm long with large suction cups on its feet.

A new and still rare python was discovered, *Python carinatus*, on a sandstone overhang. The frogs were numerous and an unusual one was *Litoria cavernicola* found deep in sandstone caves. The zoologists recorded the adult calls, which are most diagnostic, and searched for tadpoles. They also recorded osprey, frogmouth, partridge pigeon and great-billed heron. The latter are declining worldwide. The nest and eggs of the black grass wren were undescribed at that time and have only recently been discovered. The final count was 219 bird species, which is incredibly rich, especially in the rainforest patches which are unfortunately being destroyed by fire and trampled by stock.

Kevin Kenneally

Kevin Kenneally, Scientific Coordinator of CALM's *LANDSCOPE* Expeditions and a world authority on the Kimberley flora, spoke about the plant life of the Mitchell Plateau. He conducted botanical research trips to the Plateau in June 1976, May 1978, February 1979 and several times in 1982. Europeans first explored the area from the sea during the voyages made by the hydrographer Phillip Parker King. The botanist accompanying King, Alan Cunningham, made the first plant collections from the area and these are housed in the Herbarium at the Royal Botanic Gardens in Kew, England.

Kevin had excellent slides to illustrate his talk, starting with a map of the area showing the bauxite deposits that lie over Carson Volcanics surrounded by sandstone. The map, produced by AMAX, which began its operations on the Plateau in 1965, showed a township that was proposed but never eventuated at Lone Dingo at the northern end of the Plateau. In other slides we saw a costain showing kaolin under the laterite; Percy the tame emu; fruit trees planted round the mining camp and rehabilitation planting—with African mahogany seemingly the favoured tree—on the disturbed land; and Dr Ed Schneider, from University of Southwest Texas, who had come out specially to collect *Ondinea*, a rare type of water lily found only in the Kimberley.

Weather towers were constructed on the Plateau and at Cape Bougainville to supply meteorological data. Accommodation dongas were air-conditioned, a big improvement on the tents used by the first group of men setting up the operation in 1966.

The most characteristic plant on the Plateau is the fan palm, *Livistona eastonii*, named after William Easton who led the Kimberley Expedition in 1921. His party included Charles Austin Gardner (later the Government Botanist) who made numerous collections throughout the area. He published a report of the vegetation but didn't mention the rainforest patches.

Kevin was on the Plateau in January 1982 when cyclone Bruno dumped 400 mm of rain on the area within a 48 hour period and closed the airfield for two days. The Mitchell River Falls were spectacular at that time and the campsite was flooded out.

Kevin said that the plant surveys conducted on the Mitchell Plateau demonstrated how diverse the botany of the Kimberley is and that the opportunity to collect both in the "wet" and "dry" seasons is essential for understanding the floristic complexity of this region. The Mitchell Plateau is a good example of the benefits of collaborative biological research and logistical support from the mining companies.

Richard Hammond

Richard Hammond, the Coordinator of the Recreation, Planning and Site Design with CALM's Parks, Recreation, Planning and Tourism Division, was the last speaker. He has visited the Kimberley on numerous occasions and his topic was "The Future of the Plateau".

CALM currently has no land tenure on the Plateau but several new reserves have been proposed. These include a Mitchell River National Park, including the falls, Lawley River National Park, Laterite Conservation Park and Camp Creek Conservation Park.

Some of the key planning issues are:

- promotion of visitor awareness
- provision of appropriate access for vehicles and pedestrians
- provision of nature based tourism
- visitor safety
- Native Title
- protection of cultural sites
- understanding of all biological, social and cultural values

- provision of fire protection, water supply and effective management presence, and
- mining

The key to effective planning and management of visitors to the Plateau is knowledge. We must educate the public to protect this precious place because, with recreation and tourism increasing rapidly, the Plateau is at risk of being loved to death. Favourite activities include visiting the falls, fishing, photography, sight seeing, and exploring Aboriginal culture. Last year, when there were approximately 3,000 visitors to the plateau, toilets were installed and a semi-permanent camp established on Camp Creek. Roads and visitor facilities need further improvement.

A plan of management is essential for the protection of the important resource values. The current Management Plan for the area was prepared by the Mitchell Plateau Bauxite Joint Venturers in 1998. CALM is a minor player helping to implement recommendations made in the plan on behalf of the company. There are many other stakeholders including the Aboriginal community, DOLA, DOME, Bushfires Board, tour operators, the pastoral community and WATC as well as members of the public who visit the area. All have a stake in effective management of recreation and tourism on the Plateau.

Interim management guidelines for recreation and tourism development on the plateau are currently being written with specific suggestions for roads, walking tracks, camping sites, vista points and other special use areas. All stakeholders will have an opportunity to review the draft guidelines. Richard was optimistic for the future.

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All the speakers answered questions afterwards. It was a most enlightening and well-received account of the history, natural history and future of the Mitchell Plateau.

Daphne Choules-Edinger