

QUEST FOR THE HONEY-POT MOUNTAINS

On 2 February 2005, Marion Blackwell told the story, showing photographs she'd taken, of her ongoing search for the 'Mythical Honey-Pot Mountains of her Childhood Dreamings'. This search commenced at the age of 7 and culminated in the declaration of the Purnululu National Park, and subsequently, its Management Plan.

She told of the adventurous life she had had, as a little girl, living on a sheep station, high up in the Great Divide; and about receiving a 7th birthday present from her grandmother, at shearing time; of a Belleek Honey-Pot. When the shearers filed into the big homestead kitchen for 'Smoke Oh' as morning tea was then called, the man who sat down next to her, took a great interest in this beautiful little piece of china; and, after examining it carefully, he looked up and said: "Little girl, when you grow up, you just have to visit 'The Honey-Pot Mountains'. -They are over the other side of Aus, a long, long way away. -There you'll see clusters of red domes rising up from the surrounding grassy plain, with circular bands around them just like this Honey-Pot of yours."

There-from, as you might imagine, developed a life-long quest, 'to find these mystical mountains'. Throughout her teens and long after, they remained as a vision, like Lassiter's Lost Reef -a mirage, always beckoning, but ever elusive. But so like many another childhood dream, this quest proved not easy to full-fill. - Enquire as she might, no one she asked had ever heard of them; until she almost began to believe that it was all a myth. -But never the less, her inner being was quite convinced that they were real and existed somewhere: and that like many a magical trail, she just had to find a clue; then the way to them would be revealed. Even when she came to live in Western Australia in 1958, 23 years after hearing the story; still foremost and all-important in her mind was to find these Honey-Pot Mountains of her childhood vision. She asked every likely person she met in Perth, about their whereabouts; but in those days, although she had by chance known of them since she was 7, Perth still did not know of their existence, ie the Bungle Bungles were not yet 'discovered'. (That event was to wait another 24 years, ie 47 yrs from when she first heard the imagination catching description of this ancient geological phenomenon).

But, at last came the day when good fortune shone upon her quest. A chance query concerning them, to Enid Durack, mother of two of her university students; put her onto the track of their existence; when Enid replied to her question: "O that no good country, the cattle get lost down there, in those labyrinths of gorges." & so, 'At last she was onto the good oil!'

Subsequently Reg Durack told her that Nat Buchanan had droved a muster of 4,000 odd head of cattle up the eastern side of this massive in 1883. He said that those were the first cattle to enter the Kimberley and that their purpose was to stock Ord

River Station for the Victorian partnership of William Osmond and Joseph Panton. Buchanan forded the cattle over the Ord River in the dry, when it was low, and travelled them up the creeks to the Station. (By 1900 Ord River Station boasted between 80,000 and 100,000 head of cattle and wandering stock had long since strayed into, and foraged amongst the gorges of the Bungle Bungles). In later years when Marion discussed the omission of this unique and outstanding massif with Dr David Ride, the then Director of the WA Museum and prime motivator of the "Conservation Through Reserves" movement; he said "I just can not understand how such an area could have been overlooked". The fact was, that no one who was involved in that far-reaching exercise had at that time, any idea that the Bungle Bungles existed.

But the knowing that they actually 'were' real was only the first step towards satisfying Marion's driven curiosity about them, and ever heightened her desire to see them.

Her first tantalising glimpse gained of them, and then only in the middle distance, was in the mid 60's while returning with three others, pack on back, across the foothills of the Osmand Ranges, after an exploratory foray; they suddenly appeared, in full view across the plain, just as had been described to her so long ago – "The Mystical Honey-Pot Mountains". But infuriatingly as it might seem, on that occasion there was a deadline to meet and no time to stop and explore further. This fleeting glimpse, nevertheless further whetted her appetite and determination to return, and explore.

The Bungle Bungles first attracted wider interest and international media attention in 1982 when they were 'discovered' by a film crew flying over the area. This revelation and media hype almost instantaneously drew an influx of excited tourist enquiry and intent. Which phenomenon prompted the government to initiate action regarding management strategies - aimed to conserve the area, which is constructed of quite fragile sandstone. ("Burnalulu" means sandstones in the language of the Gidja People of this area).

This pressure of enquiry led to the commissioning of a preliminary botanical survey, which was undertaken in the dry of July 1984 by Kevin Kenneally and Steve Forbes.

For Marion an opportunity arose, in April 1985; this time it enabled a detailed exploration of a small but different area of the Massif, from that which had been looked at previously. This occurred with the mounting of a trek of interested persons into the southern side of the Bungles, organised by the intrepid Arthur Weston, a Botanical Ecologist of international repute. In the 5 days on the site, in the Bungles, she collected 364 flowering species of plants and other living items of interest such as fungi, lichens, mosses, liverworts, ferns and cyanophytes; As well

as gaining the certain conviction that this area was a very special place; in need of informed conservation. Three of the reasons being: -

Firstly – that it is an area of outstanding erosional landscape value, of unique scenic beauty. It has been derived from an ancient Devonian Reef and is characteristically made up of sandstone towers coloured red, due to Fe oxides, banded with horizontally with dark stripes due to the colonisation of disjunct consecutive layers by blue/black lichens and cyanophytes (blue-green algae). It is a colourful wilderness area of great beauty and diversity with descending cascading terraces of pools, and deeply ravined gorges, bordered by Mountain Cones.

Secondly – it has great significance for Aboriginal people. The Bungle Bungle Massif being rich in sites of enduring cultural significance. Current management plans for the park developed by CALM provide for:

- permanent inhabited outstations within the Park for tribal people;
- Aboriginal Rangers,
- traditional hunting and gathering rights and
- high priority being assigned to the protection of important Aboriginal sites. Aboriginal people are even permitted to have their dogs in this National Park – (A first off occurrence).

Thirdly – it is of considerable scientific and conservation value, lying as it does on the overlapping border zone of the wet/dry tropics and the arid zone of western and central Australia. It contains a complex mixture of the climates, plants and animals from both of these zones. Due to its physiognomy it is rich in habitat diversity, and as a result, is greatly richer in its biological diversity than occurs in its arid surroundings; which, even within in a few hundred kilometres inland, is graveyard to so many unique animal and plant species.

This experience was the turning point in Marion's lifelong quest, which as a result, turned thereafter into an all-out effort to achieve protection and conservation for this scientifically significant and visually outstanding area (as illustrated by her photographs). For this purpose, it was important to obtain all possible substantiating evidence about its assets, and the diversity of specimens collected, helped. She had, by this time been appointed as a member of the National Parks and Nature Conservation Authority. She remembers that the negotiations and the drafting of the Management Plan for this National Park and Conservation Reserve, because of its complexity and the complications arising from the breaking of new ground; with regard to Aboriginal habitation and allowing of the presence of dogs (belonging to the Aborigines) within the park; took the longest time and the greatest effort to achieve, of any plan undertaken by the authority.

Surveys of this region highlight the significance the overlapping of two biogeographical zones in this area. It is of considerable scientific interest that the Bungle Bungles contain the southernmost limit of existence for many Torresian species (those that occur in the Australian Tropics) for example 3 easy to recall animals, the Olive Python and 2 species of Gecko reach the inland limits of their habitats here. In addition there are many Eyrean species (characteristic of the dry inland areas of Australia) also present.

In the areas of Purnululu so far surveyed, 616 species of plants have been identified/recorded (including 17 species of weeds), 149 species of birds, 81 reptiles, 4 mammals and 12 frogs.

- These species are of very uneven distribution over the National Park and Conservation Reserve.
- The most widespread species are Torresian occurring along the creeks and sheltered gorges. This area forms the Southern inland limit for quite a number of the species present.
- In contrast are the rocky range tops. Much of these areas are covered with a diversity of Spinifex Communities. It is of interest that there are, unusually, 8 species of Triodia present on the tops. This locale provides the major habitats for Eyrean species.

One of the major concerns for this Park is that there are areas that have already undergone severe degradational change; chiefly as a result of the activities of feral animals (which had been active over the last 120 odd years) cats, donkeys, cattle, pigs, camels and water buffalo; with resultant trampling of riparian vegetation, destruction of water holes and creek beds and the elimination of their previous accompanying native habitats. This feral pressure has led to the extermination of complete ecosystems, the compaction of soils, the disruption of the stabilising soil and of surface crust, which in time has led to the loss of topsoil, as well as to breakage of the brittle sandstone surface ledges. These processes have led to erosion, siltation of water holes and trampling of, in particular the former *Padanus* Thickets, with their accompanying vegetation, flora and fauna.

Aboriginal people of the surrounding areas, report that there has been a loss from the Bungle Bungle area of several medium-sized mammals, such as the Bilby, the Northern Quoll, the Golden Bandicoot and the Northern Bandicoot. In addition, two species of bird; the Purple Crowned Fairy Wren and the White Browed Robin, which were once common in the *Pandanus* thickets occurring along the fringing creeks, are now known to have definitely disappeared.

The wealth of native species growing in the Purnululu area have evolved to be adapted to the conditions of their individual habitats so that they cope with the problems of the climatic vagaries of the edge of the desert (the parameters and

functioning of which relationships we as yet little understand), and if undisturbed, they cope relatively well. It is interference; usually in the form of the impact of feral species, that usually causes the problems of imbalance.

Although ongoing – the park has now been almost completely destocked. But we are still a long way from stopping erosion and recommencing soil formation so as to reinstate the former habitats that existed in this area, with their diversity of vegetation formations and plant species, together with their former accompanying creatures, particularly the mammals, that in earlier days inhabited each of these niches.

The ecological integrity of areas such as this is fragile, often knife-edgedly balanced even in an untouched state. Here natural conditions are widely variable and often extremely stressful, so it does not take much in the way of interference to tip the balance between existence and extinction.

In planning for conservation it is our charged responsibility to endeavour to fathom and unravel the parameters of the 'existence' relationships of the biota of such areas, so as to learn how to conserve, and where and whenever possible, to restore the unusual beauty and extraordinary grandeur, that previously existed. Marion stated that her ambition for this park, which had constituted a great slice of the conservation effort of her mature years – whilst Deputy Chairperson of the NPNCA (on which she served for the whole of its existence); had been for informed management to be set up and implemented ahead of the onslaught of uninformed usage, which could so easily and irrevocably destroy the beauty of its fragile structure and intricate ecology.

It is to be noted that, when these geological structures originally evolved, the climate could well have been much wetter, and that, as ever, we learn on the rehabilitation side, that it's so much easier to break than to remake!! Still in this day and age, funding for conservation is comparatively so minimal, in the context of tourism pressures and demands, so that despite management strategies (in the face of staff shortages), aimed at restricting foot traffic to low impact areas in order to prevent permanent damage; it is almost impossible to maintain the initial conservation aim for this park. Much of the area has not even yet been surveyed in detail.

Thus there is need for great concern regarding maintaining of the integrity of these 'Honey Pot Mountains'. They constitute such a fantastic, different and mystical place that we all should be acting to see that this area is allocated its rightful protection and care.