

Becoming Australia: Assessment 3
Experimental History

**THE MISSING PERSPECTIVE IN THE HISTORY
OF KAKADU NATIONAL PARK**

Exegesis:

These revised and rewritten newspaper articles argue that the perspective of Aboriginal Australians was ignored in the public discussions around Kakadu National Park in favour of the financial opportunities of uranium mining and tourism. Newspapers were quick to discuss the benefits of uranium mining or the chance for tourists to observe Aboriginal Australians living 'naturally' within the park, but rarely mentioned the impact of mining or the national park on the Aboriginal communities. It's common for mainstream media coverage to be unsupportive of Aboriginal opinions, making it more difficult for Aboriginal Australians to push for their positions on these issues than the government or mining companies (McCallum, Walker, & Meadows 2012, pp. 104). The four revised articles bring light to this missing perspective, focusing on the Aboriginal opposition to the Ranger uranium mine and conflicts of managing the national park, while using the same format that originally silenced their views (McCallum, Walker, & Meadows 2012, pp. 106).

The first article focuses on Aboriginal resistance to uranium mining in Kakadu. Despite inquiries acknowledging Aboriginal opposition to the Ranger mine, the Australian Government was quick to dismiss these opinions and continue developing the mines, prioritizing the potential profits (RUEI 1977, pp. 9). Many important Aboriginal Elders and senior owners spoke up about their opposition to the mines and tried to ensure the national park would be in the interest of their communities (Neidjie & Lang 2015; O'Brien 2019). Bill Neidjie's stories of growing up in Kakadu as an Aboriginal Australian share a unique perspective of Kakadu's development and its effect on Aboriginal life (Neidjie & Lang 2015; Lewis 1989). The second article demonstrates how these concerns were ignored by the government, who continued to pressure the National Land Council to agree to the Ranger mine. After recognizing the Aboriginal groups were against the mining, the government threatened that the council would be left out of negotiations if they refused to comply, so the Northern Land Council signed the Ranger agreement and uranium mining proceeded (RUEI 1977; O'Brien 2003).

The third article examines Kakadu's functioning as a national park and the role of Aboriginal Australians in its management. As the first national park owned by Indigenous people using a joint-management system, the government was proud to offer Aboriginal owners a central role in educating tourists about their history and culture (Crilley, Weber, & Taplin 2012). Aboriginal owners were allowed to continue burning practices to help maintain the landscape and habitats of Kakadu, and procedures were adopted to help preserve Aboriginal rock paintings from natural decay (Lewis 1989; RUEI 1977). However, conflicts quickly arose when this joint-management was put into practice. The quelling of feral buffalo and horses created tensions between the Aboriginal and white rangers (Haynes 2013). Even burning methods, meant to be a cooperative effort between the Aboriginal rangers and the Australian National Parks and Wildlife Service, became a disjointed effort with little communication between the two groups (Lewis 1989). The fourth article focuses on the Board of Management set up to make decisions regarding the functions of the park. The board was established with an Aboriginal majority, intended to give the traditional Aboriginal owners final say on decisions. However, meetings and procedures were run with western structures, alienating and excluding the Aboriginal members unfamiliar with these ways (Haynes 2013; Haynes 2017).

Revised Article 1: 'Uranium mining at Kakadu a "significant disturbance"', intended for publication in *The Canberra Times* on 15 August 1986.

Uranium mining at Kakadu a 'significant disturbance'

With increasing numbers of mining companies seeking to renew leases and licenses in search of uranium in the Kakadu region, there has been little consideration of how the mine would impact the Aboriginal people living in the area.

But it's become clear that the plans for the Ranger mine are incompatible with the wishes of the traditional Bininj Aboriginal landowners.

In 1977, the Prime Minister, Mr Gough Whitlam, initiated an inquiry to determine the consequences of allowing the plans for the Ranger uranium mine to continue, focusing on environmental and social impacts.

Despite the report finding the traditional Aboriginal owners of the land were opposed to the Ranger mine, the decision was made to overrule their opinion. "In the end", the inquiry states, "we form the conclusion that their opposition should not be allowed to prevail."

Discussion with the Northern Land Council had indicated they shared the same opinion against uranium mining in any part of the region.

In the inquiry, Aboriginal owners expressed anger that the mining plans had developed as far as they had without input from their people.

They did not trust that the government and mining companies would actually take their perspective into account, and were proven correct by the final result.

"They feel that having got so far, the white man is not likely to stop."

In its inquiry, the government even admits that the mining would be of no benefit to the Aboriginal people living in the Kakadu area.

Before there was talk of developing mines or mining towns in the region, the Bininj people managed and controlled their own land. But now, nearly a decade after the inquiry, many traditional Aboriginal owners still feel their voices are being ignored.

Yvonne Margarula, a Mirarr Senior Traditional Owner said, "You treat me like an animal. That is my country, I have dreaming for that country, what do you have, what do you know?"

The recent establishment of Kakadu National Park also complicates the issue of establishing the Ranger uranium mine, but this decision was one supported by the traditional Aboriginal owners.

Establishing the Kakadu region as a national park allows for certain protections of the environment and preservation of the land, such as protecting Aboriginal rock paintings, while Aboriginal members can be employed as rangers and guides.

This also grants the traditional Aboriginal owners the rights to the land and the ability to play a role in its management and use.

Many Aboriginal elders spoke up in an effort to protect the land they've lived on for thousands of years. Bill Neidjie, a Gagudju elder, was instrumental in the negotiations of the national park, hoping to prevent the granting of any more uranium leases.

But with a history of ignoring Aboriginal wishes in the pursuit of a profit, it's difficult to predict the future of uranium mining the region.

Original Article 1: 'Uranium mining at Kakadu a "minimal disturbance"', published in *The Canberra Times* on 15 August 1986.

Uranium mining at Kakadu a 'minimal disturbance'

Mining companies seeking renewed licenses to explore for uranium in Kakadu National Park yesterday told a Federal Parliamentary inquiry that there would be minimal disturbance to the environment.

But the World Wildlife Fund said mining operations were incompatible with Kakadu's national-park status.

The managing director of Kratos Exploration, Mr James Stewart, said more than \$750,000 had been spent on initial exploration by his company and Bridge Oil Limited before license renewal was refused by the Northern Territory Government in December, 1973.

Airborne surveys had indicated about 150 potential uranium deposits Mr Stewart told the Senate standing committee in national resources, which held a public hearing yesterday and is holding another hearing today.

The committee is inquiring into the potential of "exploiting" resources in the Kakadu National Park region, particularly the impact of mining and tourism.

In his submission to the committee, Mr Stewart said the initial airborne surveys were inadequate to properly assess the region's uranium potential.

"The joint venturers wish the previous titles to be re-issued with appropriate environmental safeguards and normal follow-on mining rights so that they can continue with their exploration program," Mr Stewart said.

"It has been shown that mineral exploration activities can be carried out with minimal disturbance of the environment."

In its submission, the World Wildlife Fund said Kakadu was of outstanding universal value and provided opportunities for tourism, education and scientific research.

But the fund said mining was incompatible with Kakadu's national-park and world-heritage status. It also said urgent attention was required to remove buffalo from within the park and its surrounding areas.

"These buffalo have caused and

continue to cause considerable damage to the outstanding wetland resources of the Kakadu region," the fund said.

The Department of Sport, Recreation and Tourism said in its submission that Kakadu offered outstanding tourism potential both domestically and internationally.

The number of visitors to the park had increased from 50,000 in 1983 to an estimated 120,000 last year, and further accelerated growth could be expected through promotion and additional visitor facilities.

"Any exploration of the park's exceptional tourism resources, however, must be particularly sensitive to environmental considerations lest uncontrolled tourism will destroy the very resource which people come to admire," the Department said.

"There is little doubt that controlled tourism can provide large and ongoing benefits to the area without damaging the environment."

Revised Article 2: 'Kakadu must be mined: Fraser', intended for publication in *The Canberra Times* on 8 November 1978.

PARLIAMENT

Kakadu must be mined: Fraser

The Northern Land Council (NLC), on behalf of traditional Aboriginal landowners, opposed the prospect of uranium mining in the Northern Territory's Kakadu region but supported plans for the region to become a national park along with the already established Woolwonga Aboriginal Reserve.

With the introduction of Aboriginal land rights legislation, development of the Ranger uranium mine was halted until at least 1976.

During this time, the Minister for the Northern Territory declared that no mining would proceed until environmental and Aboriginal interests had been considered. But with a growing international demand for uranium for the use of nuclear energy, it was believed uranium mining would make Australia more economically independent.

The country was suffering from inflation and unemployment, giving the new government of Prime Minister Whitlam strong motivation to pursue uranium mining.

In 1977, the Commonwealth Government declared that, alongside establishing a national park, development of the Ranger uranium mine would proceed.

On the surface, the NLC and Aboriginal owners were given a chance to veto the mining decision as granted in the Aboriginal Land Rights Act. But the council was being forced into a difficult position: if they didn't cooperate with the government and agree to the mining, an agreement would be written without their input.

Chairperson Galarwuy Yunupingu said told the council members that, under pressure from the current government, the issue of mining and exploration would be forced if they did not comply with the agreement.

"If we don't sign the agreement, Mr Fraser has told me he has the power to block the Aboriginal Land Rights Act, and that he will stop the funds to the outstations", he said.

In the end, many traditional Aboriginal landowners were tired of fighting the government's pushes to go through with the mining, giving in to the Ranger Agreement.

Last week, on 3 November 1978, both the Ranger Agreement and Kakadu National Park lease were signed, allowing uranium mining to proceed with what many believe to be insufficient environmental provisions.

Original Article 2: 'Kakadu can be mined: Carrick', published in *The Canberra Times* on 28 October 1981.

PARLIAMENT

Kakadu can be mined: Carrick

The Minister for National Development and Energy, Senator Carrick, refused yesterday to rule out the prospect of uranium mining in the Northern Territory's Kakadu National Park, but gave an assurance there would be no pollution in the area.

The park was included on Monday in the United Nations World Heritage List.

Senator Carrick, replying to questions in the Senate, said that, if measures to protect the environment were followed, there was no reason why there should be a slowing down of uranium mining.

At present there is no mining in the actual park area, although the Ranger, Nabarlek and Jabiluka mines – which together represent more than 10 per cent of the world's uranium – are closed to its boundaries.

Senator Carrick said that, under the current five-year management plan for Kakadu, exploration and mining could proceed if the Government wished. There was no eternal exclusion from uranium mining.

"The World Heritage listing is subject to nomination, being protected by the host nation's rules and laws", he said.

National parks and wildlife-conservation laws provided protection against ecological disturbance.

"Nothing will be done that will in any way pollute or disturb the ecology", he said, "The Government will make certain there is no pollution."

No decision on mining in the park would be made without scientific evidence.

Senator Carrick was replying to the Acting Leader of the Democrats, Senator Mason, who called for a review of plans to mine in the park in the light of a slump in uranium demand, and to Senator Mulvihill (Lab, NSW).

Aboriginal's letdown at Kakadu Park

LOCATED IN THE heart of the Northern Territory, Kakadu National Park provides an opportunity for Aboriginal Australians to play a significant role in how their land is used and culture is taught.

The first national park in the world to use a joint-management system between the Traditional Aboriginal Owners and Australian Government, this deal provides a chance for the Aboriginal people to maintain the titles to the land while leasing it back to the state to be used on negotiated terms

These terms state that the Aboriginal owners are allowed to continue their way of life—hunting, gathering, ceremonies—while also serving as rangers for the park, though it doesn't always work out this way.

This maintenance and education of culture makes Kakadu National Park unique as it's one of the few parks listed on the World Heritage list for both its natural and cultural importance.

The landscape and landmarks within the park are not only full of natural beauty but have important stories and histories connected to them. Some are sites for ceremonies while others have spiritual histories connecting the Aboriginal people to the land they've lived on for tens of thousands of years.

Preservation of the ancient Aboriginal rock paintings was a strong motivator for the formation of the national park. The cultural history represented by the art requires protection from natural erosion as the ritualistic repainting has been disrupted by changes to the Aboriginal lifestyle.

Ubirr, a complex of sandstone rock formations, contains caves covered in rock paintings that tell stories of the previous Aboriginal inhabitation.

Rangers patrol the area to help protect the art from any potential vandalism and to answer tourist questions. The site is an important part of the cultural history of Kakadu and holds the stories of generations past of the traditional Aboriginal owners.

Bill Neidjie, an Aboriginal Elder of the Kakadu region, shares stories of growing up in the area and the significance of the paintings to his history. "All that painting they done, no history book, no, only paintings. All these paintings longa cave. Important. It's your story."

The formation of the national park was seen as a way to help preserve this part of Aboriginal history.

The abundance and variety of natural wildlife in the Kakadu region is another motivating factor in establishing Kakadu as a national park. With so many different species of mammals, birds, reptiles, and plants, protection of the area from environmental destruction is crucial. The establishment of Kakadu as a national park will hopefully limit the expansion of the Ranger uranium mine, preventing the government from granting any more leases. It was tribal owners and elders, like Bill Neidjie, that were crucial in negotiating these terms.

Although Kakadu is known for its expansive wildlife, managing feral animals that can damage the flora and fauna has created conflicts between the white and Aboriginal rangers.

While the traditional Aboriginal owners value the buffalo and horses of the area, many keeping

buffalo as pets, the government saw them as an issue to be dealt with.

When white staff took the opportunity to eliminate large numbers of the buffalo and feral horses, the accidental killing of Aboriginal pets created tensions between the two groups that further strained relations.

Protecting such a significant and diverse habitat requires careful management, which had occurred in the past thanks to the Aboriginal land owners.

Kakadu's national park status attempted to give the traditional Aboriginal owners control over important aspects of the land's management, like burning practices, but even these were points of controversy.

Selective burning had been used by Aboriginal people for thousands of years to manage the brush in the area, burning particular areas at certain times to help the natural flora and prevent larger, uncontrolled fires.

The Australian National Parks and Wildlife Service (ANPWS) acknowledged that Aboriginal burning practices are important to maintain the habitat, and requested "cooperation, advice, and participation of Aboriginals living in the Park" to re-establish Aboriginal methods or burning.

However, burning in Kakadu largely occurs at the hands of Aboriginals independent of the ANPWS, and the ANPWS burns occur without consulting the Aboriginal owners.

Burning is one of many disagreements between the white and Aboriginal rangers that make joint-management of the park difficult, and not what was expected when the national park was first established.

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Naturalist's dream at Kakadu Park

TWO HUNDRED kilometres east of Darwin, Kakadu National Park offers visitors a good opportunity to observe Aborigines and their culture from both a modern and historical perspective.

The largest of Australia's many national parks, the 6,000-square-kilometre Kakadu encompasses land owned by the Aborigines but leased to the Government for use as a national park.

Several hundred Aborigines live inside the park boundaries, still following the traditional ways of their culture. Others work as park rangers, helping their people mediate with the outside world.

In 1978, the traditional owners leased their land to the director of National Parks and Wildlife to be managed as a national on behalf of all Australians.

More than 6,000 square kilometres was proclaimed as Kakadu National Park in April 1979. In 1981, Kakadu was recognised for the world heritage list.

Kakadu offers both a magnificent profusion of wildlife and an extraordinary selection of easily accessible Aboriginal rock and cave paintings. Some of these paintings date back 20,000 years, placing them among the most ancient works of art in the world today.

Katherine Gorge encompasses not one but 13 gorges, cut into ancient rock with the canyon walls climbing steeply above cool blue waters. Aboriginal paintings in places like Nourlangie Rock and Obiri Rock display a unique complexity and beauty.

More than 400 Aboriginal art sites have been catalogued within the park's boundaries, while another 1,000 are known to exist.

The majority of the rock paintings are found at Obiri and Nourlangie, where great massifs rise almost 200 metres above the surrounding plains. Eons of heavy winter rains have sculpted the edge of the escarpment into a variation of fantastic shapes and hollows.

Some of the galleries at Obiri Rock have friezes that stretch 50 metres along the rock face.

The paintings at Obiri and Nourlangie Rocks record part of the history of these people, while some illustrate their beliefs and way of life.

No other Australian national park matches the enormous wealth of wildlife of Kakadu. This is safari country, rich in Australia's nearest approach to big game; wild Asian buffalo, crocodiles, feral pigs and kangaroos – and also the large and strangely-coloured nonvenomous python, the frilled lizard and the giant perentie goanna lizard, which can reach a length of two metres. Preliminary surveys have indicated that more than 960 plant, 51 native mammal, 75 reptile and 22 frog species exist in the park.

There are also the insects, such as orange and blue grasshoppers, wasps as brilliant as peacocks and green ants that nest high in trees. Everywhere there are great mounds of termites.

Kakadu is an ornithologists paradise. One third of Australia's 720 bird species have been spotted there. The park lies in the midst of a major wetland area, and the broad estuaries, the mangrove swamps and the vast expanse of sedge, grass and paperbark are ideal feeding and nesting areas.

Visitors to the park can camp out at Jim Jim Creek and board small motor boats for wildlife cruises along the narrow river that twists and turns through savannah country. The cruises give the visitor an opportunity to see waterfowl, crocodiles and other animals at close range, for they have become accustomed to the coming and going of fishing and tour boats and the drone of their motors.

It is also possible to cruise on Yellow Waters Lagoon, the mating ground for many birds.

Yellow Waters is alive with crocodiles. There are more than 90 in the area, their protruding eyes on the waterline clearly visible.

Beyond the tidal flats and Yellow Waters Lagoon is the Arnhem Land escarpment, which marks the boundary of a wild and inaccessible region.

The sandstone escarpment, 500 kilometres long, has striking rock formations and waterfalls, and it is surrounded by a maze of river gorges.

One popular activity in the daytime is to explore Jim Jim Falls.

The 1.5-kilometre hike to the falls goes through a subtropical rainforest full of Carpentaria palms, ironwood and wattles, and over house-sized boulders along the edge of Jim Jim Falls Gorge.

The 150-metre high escarpment is reflected in the gorge's clear waters, which it is possible to swim in. The pool at the base of the falls is said to be a fountain of youth.

In describing Kakadu one naturalist said, "God made Australia an ark, put all the unique and rare animals on it, and cut off the rest of the world, but Kakadu is a wonder, even for Australia, a jewel beyond price."

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'Much concern' on Kakadu

KAKADU: Claims that the Aboriginal-majority Board of Management was creating equal opportunities for the Aboriginal people of the land to manage Kakadu National Park could not be supported, the Traditional Aboriginal Owners said yesterday.

Justice of the Federal Court of Australia, Sir Edward Woodward, said in his report that Aboriginal members of the board "must not be able to be out-voted by conservation interests", the motivation behind creating a board where Aboriginal members outnumber white members ten to four.

However, a close examination of the board's operations reveals that the meetings are structured according to western procedures, isolating the Aboriginal members who are unused to these methods.

Based on his experience at the board meetings, David Lawrence told us that these bureaucratic methods were "culturally inappropriate" and were meant to "dominate and alienate unskilled Board members."

Over the last few years, the board has become largely symbolic as Aboriginal voices continue to be drowned out.

'No concern' on Kakadu

DARWIN: Claims that Ranger uranium mine was creating environmental problems in Kakadu National Park could not be substantiated, the Northern Territory Government said yesterday.

The Minister for Mines and Energy, Barry Coulter, said all scientific studies relating to environmental conditions near the existing Ranger mine and the spent Narbalek deposit reported no cause for concern.

He said a close examination of the annual report of the Office of the Supervising Scientist showed there was no evi-

dence to support criticism of the operations made by the Australian conservation Foundation and the NT environment Centre.

Mr Coulter said the summary of the OSS report stated "the level of environmental protection from the effects of uranium mining being achieved in the region is satisfactory".

He said the conservation lobby had selectively extracted small sections of the OSS report out of context to validate claims of major environmental concern.

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