

Managing Australia's World Heritage in Kakadu National Park and Uluru Kata-Tjuta National Park

Peter Cochrane

Kakadu National Park and Uluru-Kata Tjuta National Park are very significant properties, nationally and internationally and along with the Great Barrier Reef are probably Australia's best known World Heritage icons. While both Northern Territory properties have been home to Indigenous people for tens of thousands of years and contain important evidence of continuing occupation through art sites and oral tradition, they encompass vastly different ecological, cultural and historical settings.

Both parks face some similar challenges, such as improving the participation of local Indigenous people in their management and increasing the benefits to local communities from management and associated tourism enterprises. Climate change and invasive species pose significant risks, although for different reasons.

The properties are jointly managed by Parks Australia and their traditional owners, through a governance model that is now 25 years old. Reduced revenues from government and from steadily declining visitation have put a sharp focus on operating costs, future priorities and management effectiveness.

Uluru-Kata Tjuta

Uluru-Kata Tjuta National Park is on the World Heritage List for its natural and cultural importance, with the sandstone monolith of Uluru arguably the most distinctive international symbol of the Australian landscape. Uluru and the domes of Kata Tjuta rise sharply from the park's flat plains, sand dunes, and desert oak woodlands.

At the geographic heart of Australia the predominantly red tones of Uluru and Kata Tjuta epitomise the richness, isolation and starkness of what has come to be known as 'the red centre'. These natural qualities convey a powerful sense of the very long evolution of the Australian continent.

The rock art symbols and figures on shelter walls at Uluru depict a complex cultural system that has been passed down through many generations. The land-scape of both the park and its surrounding lands are imbued with profound spiritual importance.

Tjukurpa, the traditional lore of the park's Indigenous owners, Anangu, is alive today in local social structures and customs, and it guides all aspects of life and work in the park.



Jim Jim Falls in Kakadu National Park. Photo © Scott Laidlaw, Commonwealth of Australia

It is part of the traditional belief system of one of the oldest human societies in the world. Under *Tjukurpa*, the landscapes of Uluru and Kata Tjuta are physical evidence of the actions, artefacts and bodies of the ancestral heroes (*tjukuritija*) who travelled the earth in creation times. The park's environment is an outcome of millennia of management using traditional Anangu methods governed by *Tjukurpa*. Anangu culture remains strong because the Law is embodied in *Tjukurpa* through *inma* (dance), stories, songs, ceremonies, language, knowledge and other practices to look after the country. These elements continue to define the Anangu relationship to their land.

The cultural landscape of Uluru-Kata Tjuta National Park is an outstanding illustration of successful human adaptation over many millennia to the exigencies of a hostile arid environment.

The integrity of the cultural landscape is derived from the traditional practices of its Indigenous owners and would be threatened by any substantial change to this management system.

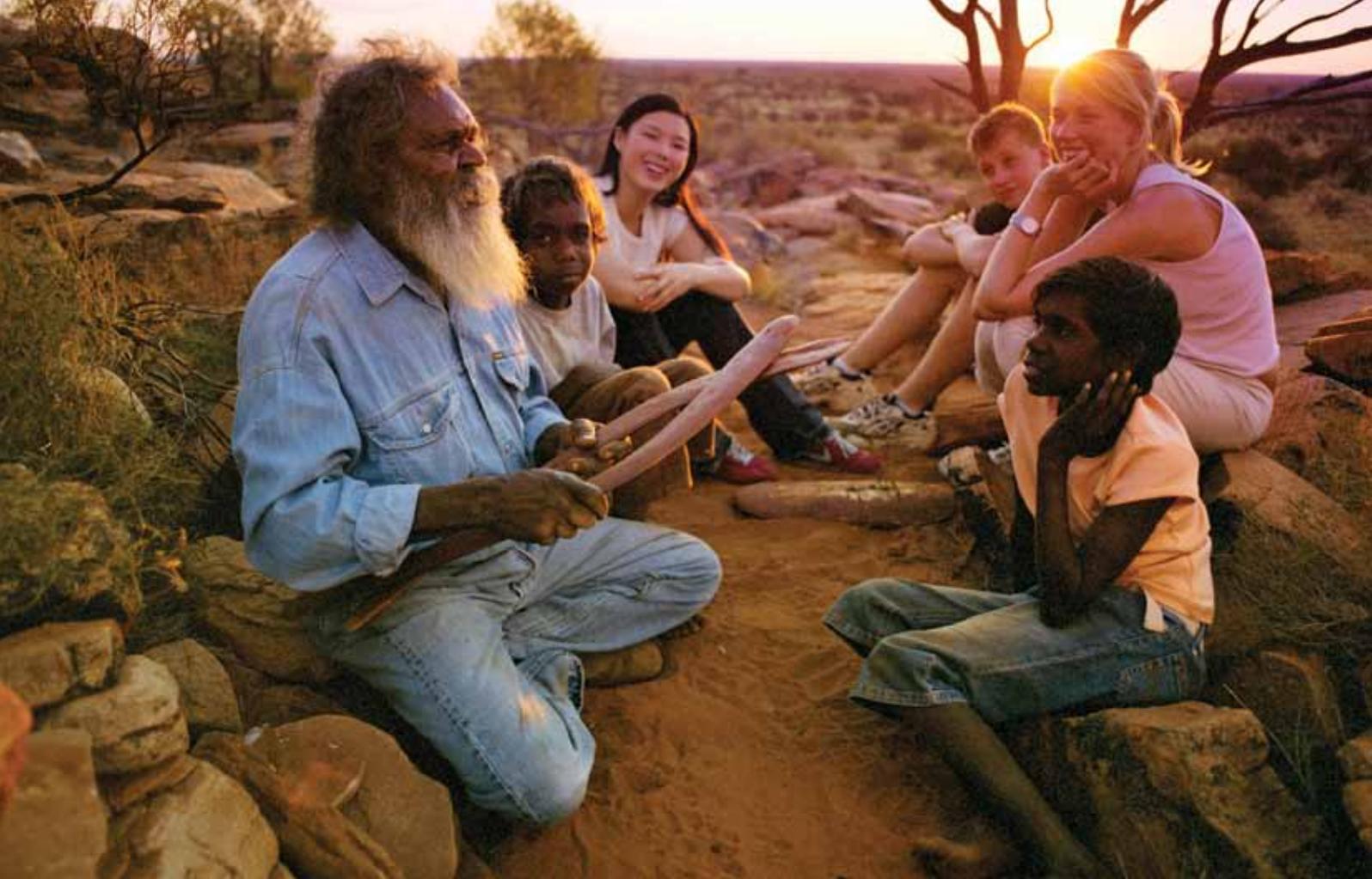
Uluru Handback 25th Anniversary.
Photo © Grenville Turner, Commonwealth of Australia (DSEWPaC)

Management

Feral animals are present, notably foxes and cats, but control measures are in place to contain them. The highly invasive buffel grass is a continuing challenge to contain. Fire has been a widely used landscape management tool for thousands of years and the park maintains an active burning program led by traditional owners. This is important as there is evidence to suggest that the cessation of traditional Aboriginal fire management across the wider landscape has led to a much greater potential for large scale wildfire with serious impacts on wildlife. An active regional approach to fire and feral animal management is now in place through collaboration with Indigenous Protected Areas which cover the vast Aboriginal lands surrounding the park.

Human impacts are largely confined to tourist and Anangu residential areas and are therefore limited. However, while sacred sites and cave paintings have been closed to public access, some visitor trespass still occurs, and there is also slow but progressive degradation from natural weathering.





Red Centre. Photo © Commonwealth of Australia (DSEWPaC).

Sustaining the authenticity of park values relates not only to protecting these physical sites but also to ensuring that Anangu continue to pass their stories, ceremonies and knowledge of their environment to future generations. An ongoing challenge is ensuring that visitors understand and respect Anangu traditions and that tourist infrastructure impacts minimally on the landscape.

Revenue from park use fees contributes to management operating costs, and steadily declining visitation has had a significant impact on park budgets over the last decade. The current management plan (2010-2020), the fifth plan since the park's establishment in 1977, provides for the eventual closure of the Uluru climb, which has been a contentious element of the park experience for decades. A key management priority is to foster the development of new visitor experiences, particularly through Indigenous businesses, to replace the climb and to rebuild visitor numbers.

The Mala, an important species associated with the cultural landscape of the park and considered extinct when the park was established, has since been successfully reintroduced into a large feral-animal free enclosure in the park.

The Mutitjulu community is located within the park, and the park provides the community with power, water and sewerage at a significant and growing cost.

Kakadu

Kakadu has been home to Aboriginal people for more than 50,000 years. Many of the park's extensive rock art sites date back thousands of years, providing a window into human civilisation before the last ice age. Detailed paintings reveal insights into the hunting and gathering practices, social structure and ritual ceremonies of Indigenous societies.

Kakadu is the largest national park in Australia and one of the largest in the world's tropics. It preserves the greatest variety of ecosystems on the Australian continent, including extensive areas of savannah woodlands, open forest, floodplains, mangroves, tidal mudflats, coastal areas and monsoon forests. The park also has a huge diversity of flora and fauna and is one of the areas of northern Australia with a wide variety of habitats largely intact.

It was established in three major steps, with the first stage declared in 1979.

Kakadu is a rich natural and cultural landscape of spectacular scenery and arresting beauty. The park contains the western rim of the ancient Arnhem Land plateau, with escarpments up to 330 metres high extending in a jagged and unbroken line for hundreds of kilometres, contrasting with vast eucalypt woodlands, dynamic freshwater floodplains and large tidal rivers.



The vast floodplains of the Alligator rivers in Kakadu National Park are one of the richest biological regions in Australia.

Photo © Ian Oswald Jones, Commonwealth of Australia

Key attractions of the park occur where streams plummet over the escarpment rim into stepped waterfalls and plunge pools.

The park was proposed as part of the development of uranium mining in the region which had started in the 1950s. The Ranger Uranium Environmental Inquiry (RUEI) ran from 1975 to 1977. The inquiry considered the environmental impacts expected to occur as a result of uranium mining in the Alligator Rivers Region. Included in those recommendations was the establishment of the Kakadu National Park (DSEWPaC, 2013). The Ranger Uranium Mine has been operating on an excision within Kakadu National Park for over 30 years. The town of Jabiru serves both the park and the mine.

Management

In the decades since Kakadu's establishment, the removal of huge numbers of Asian Water Buffalo and the progressive re-introduction of fire management led by traditional owners have led a remarkable revitalisation of the park's biodiversity. However, there are more recent challenges. The widespread decline in abundance and species richness of small mammals across northern Australia is also a characteristic of Kakadu. Predation by feral cats is a likely cause but the reality is probably more complex. The Board has approved the construction of two cat enclosures to test this hypothesis and allow for the re-establishment of populations of species that are disappearing locally. Cane toads invaded the park in 2001 and have reduced the abundance of important species including the

Northern Quoll and some reptiles. The park has collaborated with independent scientists to train Quolls to be cane-toad averse, and this trait is being successfully passed on to their offspring. Remnant Quoll populations survive in the park. While Kakadu has very successfully contained the highly invasive and devastating *Mimosa Pigra*, other weed species are progressively invading the floodplains (*Para Grass* and *Olive Hymenachne*) and river systems (*Salvinia*). *Mission and Gamba Grasses* pose major threats to fire risk and ecological function.

Cultural sites have received less attention in recent years, and natural and chemical weathering, feral animals, fire, and insects such as mud-building wasps all contribute to the slow but progressive degradation of art sites, which traditional owners do not restore.

In 2013, a decades-long fight by the main traditional owner Jeffrey Lee AM culminated in the incorporation of Koongarra into the park. Mr Lee fought to prevent mining on his ancestral lands, which were surrounded by Kakadu but excluded from the boundaries when the park was declared in 1979 because of a significant uranium deposit.

In Kakadu's south, old uranium mines and contaminated sites dating back to mining in the 1950s and 60s, have been successfully rehabilitated in close consultation with relevant traditional owners. Contaminated soils, materials and equipment have been securely buried in a permanent repository, meeting a key requirement of the park lease.



Climate change poses significant threats to the park World Heritage values. Threats include salt water intrusion into freshwater ecosystems, altered fire frequency and intensity, and changing competitiveness of native and invasive species.

Just over half the park is under claim under the Aboriginal Land Rights (NT) Act, with some claims dating back over thirty years. The township of Jabiru, which is within the park, is under a native title claim, and is likely to be scheduled as Aboriginal land as part of the settlement of this claim.

Future directions for both parks

Both parks are exploring new opportunities for outsourcing park functions to local Indigenous businesses, and fostering new visitor experiences, products and services, particularly those that employ or benefit Indigenous owners. We continue to explore new ways of increasing direct and indirect employment by Indigenous owners. We also work with local schools and community ranger groups to encourage participation in park work and to build pathways to employment and leadership roles. Existing relationships with park businesses are being placed on a more commercial basis, and web-based bookings and payments are being introduced to increase efficiency and reduce costs.

We are actively pursuing better monitoring and reporting of the results of managing both World Heritage Areas. A great diversity of partnerships with research and educational institutions contributes greatly to a better

understanding of park values, the key threats to these values, and to cost-effective ways to improve management outcomes for these outstanding national and international treasures.

References

DSEWPaC (2013). History of the Supervising Scientist. Available at: <http://www.environment.gov.au/ssd/about/history.html> [Accessed 19th April 2013].

Links

<http://www.environment.gov.au/parks/uluru/index.html>

<http://www.environment.gov.au/parks/kakadu/index.html>

<http://www.environment.gov.au/parks/publications/annual/11-12/index.html>

Author

Peter Cochrane

Director of National Parks, Parks Australia
PO Box 787, Canberra ACT 2601

Biography

Peter Cochrane has been the Director of National Parks and head of Parks Australia since 1999. In this capacity he sits on the Boards of Management for both parks.