

CHAPTER ONE

World Heritage Values and Attributes of Kakadu National Park

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CHAPTER ONE: WORLD HERITAGE VALUES AND ATTRIBUTES OF KAKADU NATIONAL PARK

The UNESCO World Heritage Committee sent a Mission to Kakadu National Park in October 1998 to investigate non government organisation and Traditional Owner claims that a proposed uranium mine at Jabiluka was a threat to the World Heritage values of the Park. The Mission report claimed that the values were threatened. In this chapter the World Heritage criteria are listed and explained and the values and attributes of the World Heritage area of Kakadu National Park are summarised. It is necessary to define the World Heritage values and attributes before it is possible to sustain an argument that the values and attributes are threatened by a project outside the boundaries. The universal significance for which the Kakadu National Park has been listed on three occasions is still protected.

1.1 KAKADU NATIONAL PARK – AN INTRODUCTION

Kakadu National Park is a special Australian place. It covers an area of 19 804 km² in the wet-dry tropics of the Northern Territory, Australia (Figure 1). It extends from the coast in the north to the southern hills and basins 150 km to the south, and from the Arnhem Land sandstone plateau in the east, 120 km to the wooded savannas and rivers of its western boundary (Figure 2). Major landforms and habitats within the Park include the sandstone plateau and escarpment, extensive areas of savanna woodlands and open forest, rivers, billabongs, floodplains, mangroves and mudflats. The area is ecologically and biologically very diverse.

Aboriginal people have occupied the area continuously for at least 50 000 years. Evidence of occupation is found throughout the Park, particularly in the rich heritage of Aboriginal art and archaeological sites.

Approximately 50% of the land in the Park is Aboriginal land under the *Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act 1976*, and most of the remaining area of land is under claim by Aboriginal people. These claims are not disputed by the Australian Government. Title to Aboriginal land in the Park is held by Aboriginal land trusts. The land trusts have leased their land to the Director of National Parks and Wildlife.

The Park is proclaimed under the *National Parks and Wildlife Conservation Act 1975* and is managed through a joint management arrangement between the Aboriginal traditional owners and the Federal Government's Director of National Parks and Wildlife. The Kakadu Board of Management determines policy for managing the Park and is responsible, along with the Director, for preparing plans of management for the Park. The Board has an Aboriginal majority (ten out of fourteen members) who represent the Aboriginal people of the Park.

Kakadu is also on the Register of the National Estate due to its national significance to the Australian people. The wetlands of Kakadu are recognised for their international significance under the Convention on Wetlands of International Importance (the Ramsar convention).

Kakadu is a special and significant place for all Australians.

Australia's indigenous people have cared for Kakadu for at least 50,000 years.

Australia's non-indigenous people have worked with indigenous people to care for Kakadu for 20 years, since the Park's declaration in 1979.

World Heritage Values and Attributes of Kakadu National Park

1.2 WORLD HERITAGE CRITERIA

Kakadu National Park is listed under the following criteria for natural heritage and cultural heritage values:

Natural Heritage

Criterion (ii): Outstanding examples representing significant ongoing geological processes, biological evolution and man's interaction with his natural environment.

Criterion (iii): Unique, rare or superlative natural phenomena, formations or features or areas of exceptional natural beauty.

Criterion (iv): The most important and significant habitats where threatened species of plants and animals of outstanding universal value from the point of view of science and conservation still survive.

Cultural Heritage

Criterion (i): Represent a unique artistic achievement, a masterpiece of the creative genius.

Criterion (vi): Be directly or tangibly associated with events or with ideas or beliefs of outstanding universal significance.

The specific attributes that make up these World Heritage values of Kakadu National Park are many and varied. These attributes range from specific sites and features to Kakadu's expansive landscapes and stories of evolution, and include less tangible features such as the cultural and spiritual associations and interactions between the landscape and a living culture.

Kakadu World Heritage

ecology
geomorphology
biology
people and their environment
culture and spirit
unique and rare
exceptional beauty
art and culture
creativity

The escarpment of Kakadu
(Science Group, Environment Australia)

Inset
Billy-goat plum
(Planchonia Careya)
(Michael Preece)



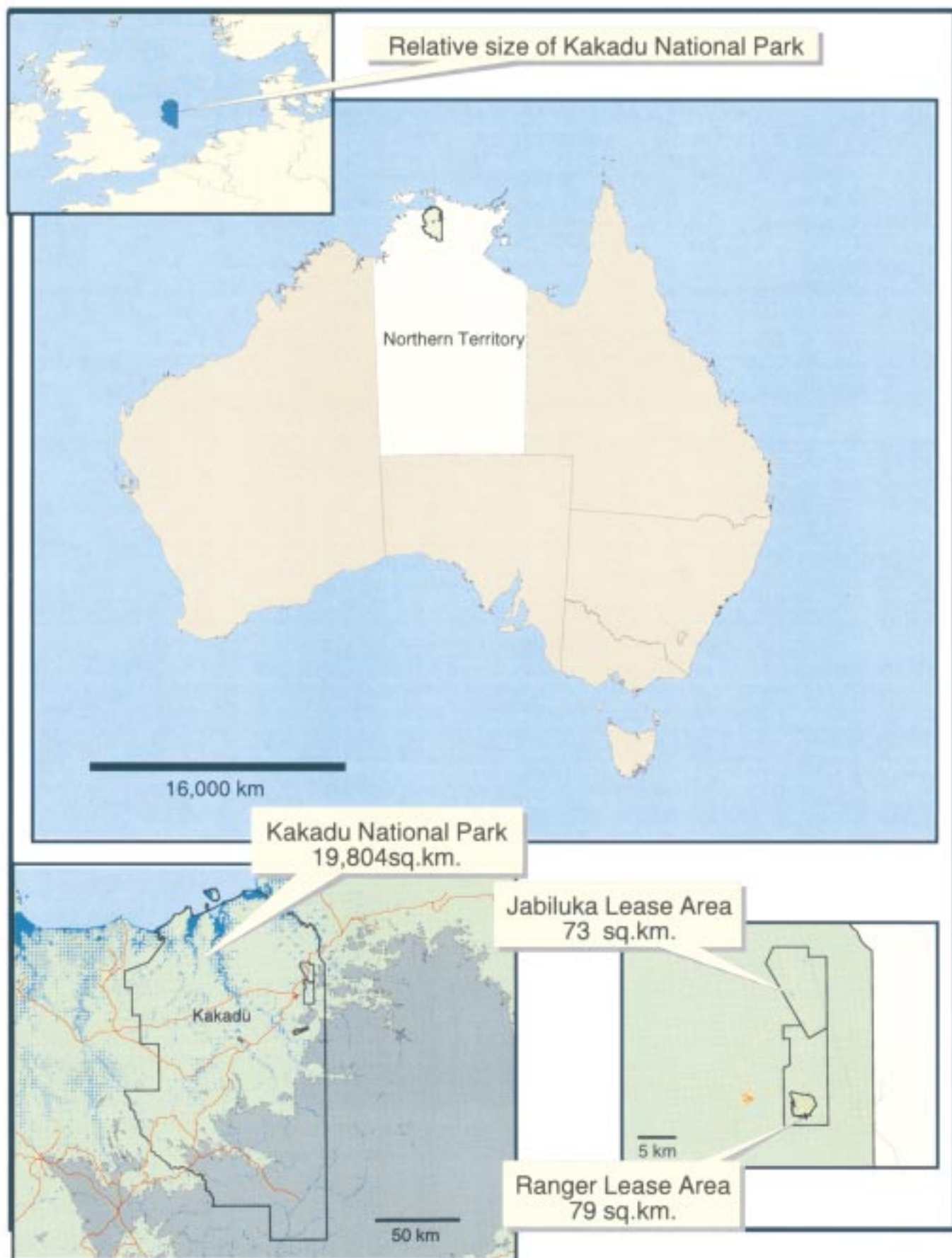


Figure 1: Relative sizes and location of Kakadu National Park, Jabiluka and Ranger Mine Leases.

This figure is for illustrative purposes only.

World Heritage Values and Attributes of Kakadu National Park

1.3 NATURAL VALUES AND ATTRIBUTES

Outstanding examples of ongoing geological processes and illustrations of the ecological effects of sea-level change in northern Australia.

The coastal riverine and estuarine flood plains of the South Alligator, West Alligator, East Alligator, and Wildman rivers are included within Kakadu National Park and provide important examples of ongoing geological processes and illustrate the ecological effects of sea-level change in northern Australia.

The geomorphology and ecology of these coastal floodplains have undergone considerable change in a relatively short geological period. These changes provide a useful record of the development of freshwater floodplains and the successional responses of mangrove environments across northern Australia.

The ecosystems of Kakadu's wetlands, woodlands and the Arnhem Land Plateau provide outstanding examples of significant ongoing ecological and biological processes in the evolution and development of terrestrial, fresh water and coastal ecosystems and communities of plants and animals.

In comparison with the rest of the Australian continent, the environments of north Australia have been little affected by European settlement. Attributes contributing to this value include:

- the scale and integrity of landscapes and environments, including extensive and relatively unmodified vegetation cover and largely intact faunal composition;
- high flora and fauna species diversity;
- rare and endangered species;
- habitat heterogeneity; and
- endemic plant and animal species.

*Waterbirds of
Kakadu during
the wet season
(Science Group,
Environment
Australia)*



World Heritage Values and Attributes of Kakadu National Park

Kakadu National Park contains a wide range of environmental gradients and contiguous landscapes that constitute a significant representation of Australia's wet-dry tropics.

Kakadu National Park contains a wide variety of habitats and vegetation types, including:

- open forest and woodlands;
- lowland and sandstone monsoon rainforests;
- wetland, riverine, and coastal environments;
- mangroves and floodplains; and
- shrubland and heath.

The diversity of landscapes, habitats and species of Kakadu National Park, combined with its vast size, are attributes of significant conservation value and provide an excellent environment for the continuation of ecological processes. This great diversity and size enhances the ability of ecosystems and species within the Park to respond to and recover from natural disturbances and catastrophic events. These key attributes contribute to maintaining a high level of protection for the integrity of Kakadu's World Heritage values.

The natural features in the region, including the plants and animals in the Park, feature prominently in the religious beliefs and cultural traditions of the local indigenous people. The landscape reflects 50,000 years of ongoing human occupation and land management by indigenous people and represents an outstanding example of man's interaction with the natural environment.

Kakadu National Park is a landscape of cultural, religious and social significance to local Aboriginal people. Special places in the landscape include ceremonial places, sites of religious significance, archaeological and rock art sites and other areas that have special meaning to Aboriginal people. These sites both reflect the long history of Aboriginal occupation of the landscape and remain central to Aboriginal culture in the region.

The South Alligator River catchment is protected in the Kakadu National Park (Mark Hallam)



World Heritage Values and Attributes of Kakadu National Park

The joint management arrangements for Kakadu National Park specifically provide for the ongoing use and occupation of the Kakadu landscape by its indigenous landowners and the maintenance of Aboriginal cultural traditions. The continuing practice of fire management by indigenous landowners is one example of how ongoing traditions are directly linked to the conservation management of the Park.

Kakadu National Park includes several important and significant habitats where threatened species of plants and animals of outstanding universal value from the point of view of science and conservation still survive.

While the diversity of plant and animal species of Kakadu is a significant value in itself, Kakadu also contains the habitats of a variety of species which are of outstanding scientific and conservation value. These include species listed as rare or threatened, species recognised as having special conservation status under international treaties, and species which have experienced drastic range reductions, or are of particular scientific interest, such as relict species.

Several important plant associations are also restricted to Kakadu National Park, including those associated with *Eucalyptus koolpinensis*, the heath vegetation on the margins of the Marrawal Plateau, and woodland containing *Terminalia platytera* on Snake Plains.

The landscape of Kakadu National Park is of exceptional natural beauty and aesthetic importance and contains superlative natural phenomena

Kakadu National Park contains features of great natural beauty and magnificent sweeping landscapes. The on-ground attributes which contribute to the values of Kakadu include the:

- expansive and varied landscapes including coastline, wetlands, floodplains, the Arnhem Land Plateau and outliers;
- exceptional natural beauty of viewfields;
- unusual mix and diversity of habitats found in such close proximity; and
- scale of undisturbed landscape.

The north of the Park is characterised by extensive lowlands and a vast expanse of wetlands. These extensive wetlands are listed under the Convention on Wetlands of International Importance, especially as Waterfowl Habitat (the Ramsar Convention). The Ramsar wetlands comprise the catchments of two large river systems, the East and South Alligator Rivers, seasonal creeks and the lower reaches of the East Alligator River, the Magela Creek floodplain, the West Alligator River system, and nearly all the Wildman River system. The wetlands support about one million waterbirds of over 60 species, as well as many other vertebrate and invertebrate species. The two river systems of the wetlands are outstanding examples of the series of large rivers of the Torresian monsoonal biogeographic region draining to the Arafura Sea.

Kakadu Natural Values

plants and animals
escarpments
and plains
wetlands and
woodlands
cliffs and coasts
billabongs and ocean
big rivers and
small streams
caring for country
science and
conservation



*Termite Mounds
and Woodland
in Kakadu
National Park*



*Exquisite
Leichhardt's
grasshoppers
(Petasida
ephippegera)
(Michael Preece)*

World Heritage Values and Attributes of Kakadu National Park

1.4 WORLD HERITAGE CULTURAL VALUES AND ATTRIBUTES

The rock art sites of Kakadu represent a unique artistic achievement. The art spans an unrivalled continuum of at least 10 000 years to the present. This collection of art is strongly linked and integral to the living traditions of contemporary indigenous landowners and a strong physical expression of the long history of the indigenous occupation of the Kakadu landscape.

Kakadu National Park contains one of the greatest concentrations of rock art in the world. It is estimated that there are more than 15 000 rock art sites in the escarpment and plateau country, of which some 5000 have been recorded by Park staff. Many of these sites contain a large number of individual paintings. Areas of particular significance for rock art include Cannon Hill, Ngarradj Warde Djokkeng, the Nourlangie-Mt Brockman massif, Ubirr, Namarrgon Djahdjah, and Deaf Adder Creek.

A significant aspect of the art is the range of art forms and styles found in Kakadu. This includes hand and other stencils, depictions of animals and humans, battle and hunting scenes, and elaborate multicoloured X-ray art. Drawings in beeswax and 'contact art', which depicts the first contact of Aboriginal people with the Macassan and European cultures, are also found in the National Park.

A strong association exists between Aboriginal cultural sites (including rock art sites) and the living traditions and beliefs of Aboriginal people in the Park. This association continues in the social and cultural activities of communities today. Paintings reflect the history of Aboriginal occupation of the landscape, can portray the spiritual figures that created the landscape and embody the cultural beliefs and traditions of Aboriginal people in the region.

In addition to their religious significance, rock paintings also provide a valuable storehouse of traditional knowledge—showing objects, animals and activities familiar to Aboriginal people today, mythological heroes, and paintings of religious and ceremonial life. Paintings were often used for teaching children, for artistic expression, as a record of events such as a successful hunt, and to illustrate stories.



Ubirr
rockshelter,
Kakadu is
renowned for
its rock art
(Mark Hallam)

World Heritage Values and Attributes of Kakadu National Park

Kakadu provides outstanding examples of the hunting and gathering way of life that has dominated the Australian continent to modern times. Kakadu is particularly significant on a global scale because it represents a continuing cultural tradition that can be traced back to the earliest known human occupation of the continent.

Kakadu reflects an outstanding example of a landscape that has evolved in company with continuing Aboriginal occupation and 50,000 years of a hunting and gathering culture. While sites provide the earliest available evidence of human occupation of the Australian continent, dating as far back as 50,000 years, they also provide a valuable record of human responses and adaptation to environmental changes since that time.

Kakadu represents an outstanding example of where the landscape is embedded in the continuing and developing cultural tradition of indigenous communities.

The Aboriginal people have an important spiritual bond with the land. Their spiritual belief centres on spirit beings from the creation era, who emerged to give form and life to the earth. At the end of their work, these beings departed or rested in the landscape. They retained their powers to influence the life of humans and are considered to be a vital force in the continuation of human life, local Aboriginal culture and the productivity of the land.

Throughout Kakadu National Park lies a collection of places and landscapes associated with these spirit beings which are of significant cultural, religious or social importance to the Aboriginal people.

Traditional beliefs and practices remain important in the daily life of Aboriginal communities and rites and ceremonies continue to be practiced. The continuing ability of these communities to undertake and develop the cultural practices, traditions and customs associated with caring for country, contributes to the values of Kakadu as a World Heritage Area.

Kakadu Cultural Values

people and culture
culture and art
art and people
people and environment
people and belief
people and ceremony
caring for country
rock art past present
future
cultural tradition
archaeology and science
hunting and gathering

CONCLUSION

Kakadu National Park is a special Australian place. The World Heritage natural and cultural values and attributes for which Kakadu National Park has been inscribed are recognised, protected and promoted. Australia can show that these values and attributes are protected while responding constructively to suggestions for improvement. Australia recognises that it holds and cares for the values of Kakadu National Park for all Australians and for the world.