

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

DEFINITION

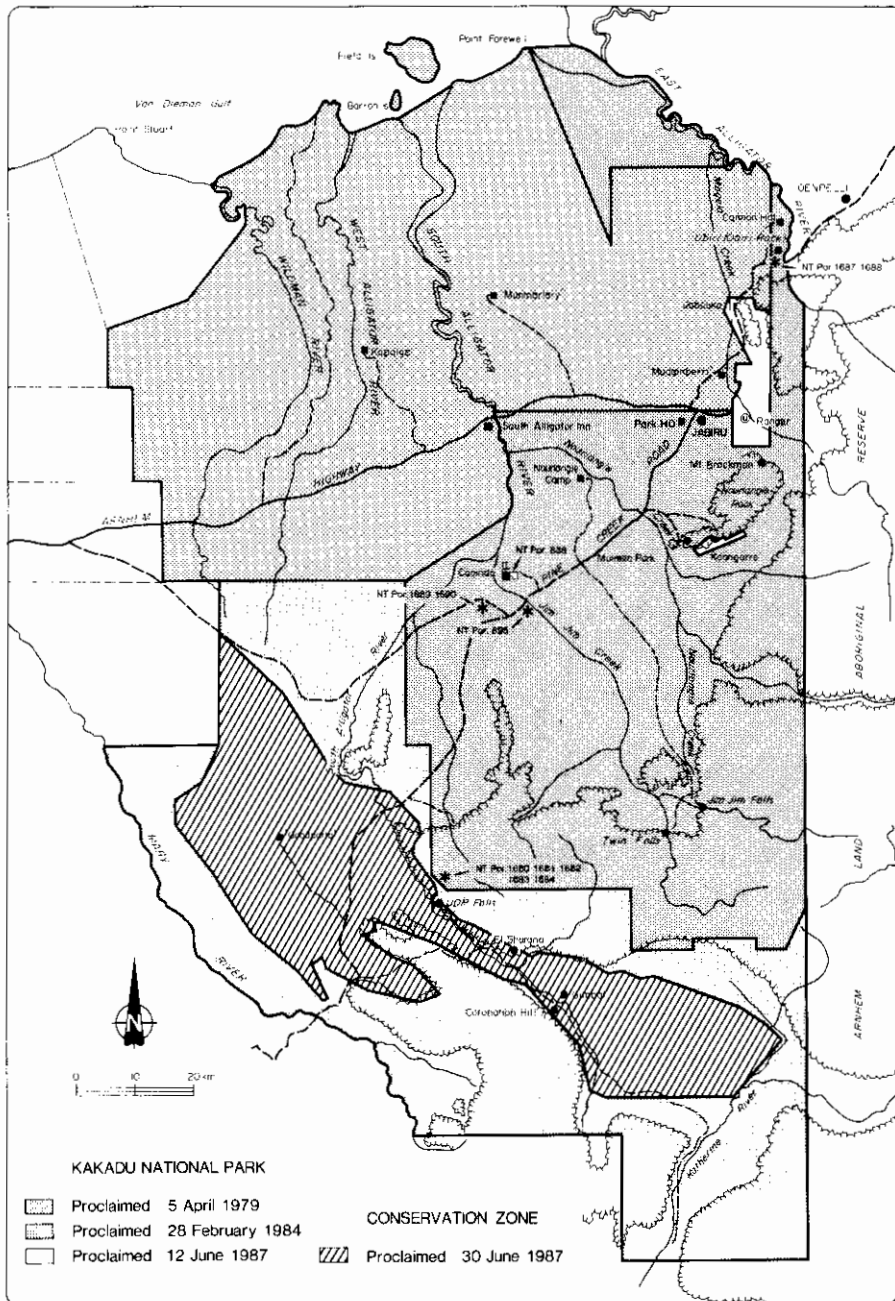
1. The Kakadu National Park region is located some 120 km east of Darwin and encompasses an area of 19 804 square kilometres. It extends west of the Wildman River, east to the Arnhem Land border and from the low water mark in Van Diemen Gulf south to the Mary River and the Gimbat pastoral lease boundary.

2. For the purpose of this report the Kakadu National Park region is taken to be the area within the outermost boundaries of Stages 1, 2 and 3 of Kakadu National Park. Defined in this way the region includes areas which, while within Park boundaries, have been excluded from the Park proper. (See Figure 1.1) These areas are:

- . the Conservation Zone in Stage 3 of 2252 square kilometres;
- . the Ranger Project Area 8300 ha;
- . the Jabiluka Project Area 7275 ha;
- . Noranda Australia Ltd (Koongarra) 1228 ha S.M.L. 69 (application);
- . Cooida 259.64 ha (NT Por. 838 and NT Por.895);
- . Dampier Mines 80.9 ha (NT Por. 1680, 1681, 1682, 1693 and 1684);
- . the Border Store 2.42ha (NT Por. 1688 and 1687); and
- . Spring Peak 2.12 ha (NT Por. 1689 and 1690).¹

It should be noted that in this report Stage 1, Stage 2 and Stage 3 are used to indicate geographical regions which include the areas listed above which are not part of the national park.

Figure 1.1



Kakadu National Park region:

Map courtesy Australian National Parks and Wildlife Service

Unless otherwise indicated these should not be taken in the strict sense of applying only to land included within Kakadu National Park.

DESCRIPTION

3. The Kakadu landscape results from a process of ongoing weathering, erosion and sedimentation that has taken place over some 2000 million years. The tidal flats of the coast and the broad estuaries with their fringing patches of mangrove forest form a link between the marine and terrestrial environments. Inland there are expanses of sedge, grass and paperbark. Fresh supplies of sediment are received each year on the lowlands when the rivers flood, depositing their loads. The drier lowland hills are covered by a mosaic of grassland, savannah and open eucalypt forest. To the east and south the spectacular 500 kilometres long sandstone escarpment, with its striking rock formations and waterfalls, marks the edge of the Arnhem Land Plateau. Criss-crossed with deep fissures, dotted with caves and hollows and with vast tracts of exposed rock, the Plateau presents a stark and rugged terrain which is rich in plant and animal life. As the escarpment eroded and retreated eastward, outliers of more resistant rock were left behind. The geographical features are complemented by the long history of Aboriginal occupation which has given the region a rich legacy of rock paintings and Aboriginal sites.²

HISTORY OF THE REGION

4. The first settlement of the area took place probably over 40 000 years ago,³ taking advantage of both the great variety of food sources and the shelter provided by caves and overhangs in the area of the escarpment. It has been estimated that before white man came there were 2000 Aborigines living in the region.

5. The first known contact with outsiders came from Maccassan fishermen in the early 18th century.⁴ The first contact with white people was established when Raffles Bay and Port Essington were settled in 1827 and 1838 respectively. When Ludwig Leichardt crossed the region in 1845, he claimed to have met Aborigines who could speak English. In 1850 white settlers passed through the southern part of the region.

6. From the late 1860s further contact between Aboriginal people and white settlers was made with the establishment of Palmerston (now Darwin), the construction of the overland telegraph, the development of Pine Creek gold fields and the establishment of pastoral properties. Some Aborigines were employed in pastoral and agricultural work, in mining and in buffalo hunting.⁵ These developments had an adverse effect on the Aboriginal population. For example, the establishment of pastoral properties, including Gimbat and Goodparla from 1880 onwards had far-reaching effects on Jawoyn demography and lifestyle,⁶ and some Aborigines were drawn to Palmerston. During the latter part of the 19th century and the early 20th century large numbers of Aborigines died, due largely to the spread of disease, including tuberculosis and leprosy.⁷

7. Further changes took place in the early 1920s when the West Arnhem Land Reserve (later incorporated in the larger Arnhem Land Reserve) was created 'as a consequence of the deleterious effects of (white) contact on the Aboriginal population'.⁸ In 1925 the Church Missionary Society established a mission at Oenpelli, confronting the Aboriginal population with social and religious change. As a consequence there was movement of traditional Aboriginal land owners west to Oenpelli, although these moves were not permanent. Another event which caused the dispersal of Aborigines from their traditional land was World War II when groups were housed in army camps along the Stuart

Highway.⁹ In 1942 Aborigines were moved to Mataranka and Katherine as a result of being officially prohibited from living North of the Edith River.¹⁰

8. The early 1950s saw an improvement in accessibility when a graded road was put in from Moline to Jim Jim Creek and the importance of the area for recreational activities began to increase. In the south of the region the discovery and subsequent mining of uranium in the Stage 3 area of the region caused numbers of Aborigines to leave the area¹¹ and from the late 1950s the number of Aborigines working in pastoral properties in the area declined. In 1961 there were 12 Aborigines living and working the Gimbat pastoral lease and in 1979 there were no Aborigines at Gimbat. In 1975 there were about 600 Aborigines living at Oenpelli and about 200 in the Kakadu National Park region.¹²

HISTORY OF THE PARK

9. As early as 1964 part of the region was recognised as having biological significance and the Woolonga Aboriginal reserve, located in the Nourlangie Creek catchment, was proclaimed as a wildlife sanctuary.¹³ During the late 1960s further proposals for a national park were made and in 1972 the Alligator Rivers Wildlife Sanctuary was declared.¹⁴ In 1973 the then Prime Minister announced there would be a national park named Kakadu.¹⁵ The name Kakadu is derived from Gagudju, one of the several Aboriginal languages of tribes which inhabited the area.¹⁶

10. In 1975 the Ranger Uranium Environmental Inquiry was set up to consider the future of the Alligator Rivers Region, following further discoveries of major uranium deposits at

Jabiru, Jabiluka, Koongarra and Narbalek. In 1975 the inquiry reported and the recommendations included the establishing of a major park in the region.¹⁷

11. Kakadu National Park was declared progressively in three stages. Stage 1, an area of 6144 sq.kms. was proclaimed on 5 April 1979.¹⁸ Stage 2, an area of 6929 sq.kms., was declared on 28 February 1984.¹⁹ Stage 3, an area of 4479 sq.kms., was proclaimed on 12 June 1987 along with a Conservation Zone area of 2252 square kilometres which is contained within the boundaries of Stage 3.

STATUS OF THE PARK

12. In 1981 Stage 1 of the Park was inscribed on the list of World Heritage Properties, a list authorised in the UNESCO Convention Concerning the Protection of Wildlife Conservation and National Heritage. Stage 2 of the Park was listed in 1987 and, at this time, Stage 3 was foreshadowed to UNESCO as a possible listing for the future. Countries which are parties to the UNESCO Convention are required to protect and conserve the natural and cultural heritage of areas on the World Heritage List.

13. Quite apart from obligations imposed by the inclusion of Stages 1 and 2 of the Park on the World Heritage List, Australian Government policy has been to accept that national parks have a particular status, requiring conservation. In 1970 for example, State and Commonwealth Ministers agreed upon a definition of a national park which provides for protection 'from all interference other than essential management priorities'.²⁰ The presence of Aboriginal sacred sites in the region also imposes some restrictions on the use of the Park. Many such sites have been registered by the Aboriginal Sacred Sites Authority for their protection.

14. Recent amendments to the National Parks and Wildlife Conservation Act 1975 have prohibited mining in Kakadu National Park. This prohibition does not apply to the Conservation Zone which, although contained within the boundaries of Stage 3, is not part of the Park, or to other areas excluded from the Park proper (see paragraph 2). Exploration and mining may be allowed in the Conservation Zone, under certain strict conditions. These activities are required to be strictly regulated, as the Zone forms part of the catchment area of the Park and activities carried out there may have environmental implications for other parts of the Park.

OWNERSHIP OF THE LAND

15. Almost all of the land in Stage 1 of the Park is Aboriginal land, the title to which was granted under the Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act 1976. This land is leased back to the Director of the Australian National Parks and Wildlife Service (ANPWS). The Jabiru Town Site, the Cooina Motel and Border Store leases are not included in the land granted to Aborigines.

16. Approximately seven per cent of Stage 2 of the Park is Aboriginal owned. The remainder belongs to the Commonwealth.

17. The Gimbat and Goodparla pastoral leases, now resumed by the Commonwealth, constitute Stage 3 of the Park and the Conservation Zone. The whole of Stage 3 is now the subject of a land claim by Aborigines.

MANAGEMENT OF THE REGION

18. The potential of the Kakadu National Park region can be viewed from many different perspectives. Some regard the region as having great spiritual significance, while others note the value of the mineral deposits. Another group sees the region's potential in providing wilderness experience or to view an ancient heritage and stunning scenery and wildlife. To still others it is a catchment area of great environmental significance

encompassing major river systems, major wetlands and escarpment country, each area having its own particular plant, animal and fish habitats and needing to be protected from the depredations of undue or uncontrolled human interference or exploitation. Others see wildlife, both native and introduced, as a resource to be exploited for commercial purposes. Buffalo are the subject of an eradication program because of the environmental damage they have caused and because they are reservoirs of brucellosis and tuberculosis.

19. These views are not necessarily mutually exclusive but the realisation of different values within the region can create and has created conflict. There are those who believe the environment should be preserved at all costs, to the exclusion of mining and the restriction of tourism. Arguments have been presented in favour of and against the commercial and recreational exploitation of animals, especially buffalo and barramundi. There is debate about the priorities Aboriginal people, traditional land owners living in the area, should have personally and culturally. Since the creation of the Park, Aborigines have moved back into their traditional land and today there are about 277 living in the region. Aborigines may exercise their traditional rights to fish, hunt and gather plant material in the Park.²¹ Some have employment working in the region, with the Australian National Parks and Wildlife Service, Ranger, BHP and the Gagudju Aboriginal Association.

20. The resolution of these conflicting views and competing demands is not an easy task and it forms the subject of the subsequent chapters of the report. All that need be said here is that at present the Park is managed by the Director of the Australian National Parks and Wildlife Service (ANPWS) in close liaison with the traditional Aboriginal owners. Local interest groups provide input into the administration of the Park through

the Kakadu Interest Group Advisory Committee. The Co-ordinating Committee for the Alligator Rivers Region assists the Supervising Scientist to monitor the effects of uranium mining operations on the region. The Director of ANPWS and the Kakadu Conservation Zone Advisory Committee manage the Conservation Zone in Stage 3.

21. A plan of management for the Park is prepared by the Director of the Australian National Parks and Wildlife Service. It sets out a description of the way in which the Park is to be managed for the next five years. Matters dealt with in the plan of management include zoning, fauna and flora habitat, cultural resource management, access, information, residents and occupancies, visitor accommodation, tour operators, recreational activities, research, monitoring and environmental evaluations, administration and control works.²²

1. Australian National Parks and Wildlife Service (ANPWS) 1986 Plan of Management p. 67
2. ANPWS 1982 Kakadu National Park Northern Territory Pamphlet p. 3
3. Derrick Ovington 1986. Kakadu a World Heritage of Unsurpassed Beauty AGPS p. 6
4. Ranger Uranium Environmental Inquiry (RUEI), Second Report 1977. AGPS p. 6
5. Evidence p. 1590
6. Evidence p. 1591
7. RUEI op cit p. 38
8. ibid p. 38
9. RUEI op. cit p. 39
10. Evidence p. 1008
11. Evidence p. 820
12. RUEI op cit p. 39
13. RUEI op cit p. 19
14. Evidence p. 1745
15. RUEI op. cit. p. 19
16. ANPWS 1988 Kakadu National Park Visitor Guide
17. RUEI op cit p. 328
18. Evidence p. 1762
19. Evidence p. 1763
20. Evidence p. 1699
21. ANPWS 1986 Kakadu Plan of Management p. 30
22. ibid p. 2