



**Australian Government**

**Department of Sustainability, Environment,  
Water, Population and Communities**

# THE WEST KIMBERLEY WESTERN AUSTRALIA

The west Kimberley is one of Australia's very special places. It is a vast area of dramatic and relatively undisturbed landscapes that has great biological richness and provides important geological and fossil evidence of Australia's evolutionary history.

With sheer escarpments and pristine rivers that cut through sandstone plateau and ancient coral reefs to create spectacular waterfalls and deep gorges, the region's remoteness has created a haven that supports plant and animal species found nowhere else on the Australian continent.

Against the backdrop of this extraordinary landscape is woven a remarkable account of Aboriginal history over the course of more than 40,000 years and the story of European exploration and settlement, from William Dampier's landing at Karrakatta Bay to the development of rich and vibrant pastoral and pearling industries that continue today.

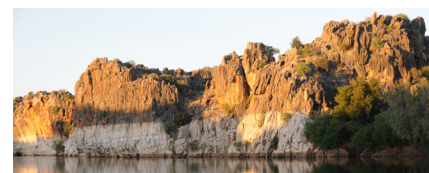
The west Kimberley is one place with many stories.

## Inspirational landscapes

The west Kimberley is renowned for its dramatic and beautiful landscapes, including the towering cliffs, rocky headlands, sandy beaches, natural rivers, spectacular waterfalls and thousands of islands off the remote sandstone coast. Inland lies the rugged Kimberley plateau, with its deep gorges and cascading waterfalls, the striking King Leopold Ranges, and Windjana and Geikie gorges, which cut through the limestone of an ancient coral reef.

## Ancient geology

1,800 million years ago the Kimberley was a separate land mass that collided with the ancient Pilbara and Yilgarn, forming the core of the future Australian continent. The King Leopold Ranges are the remnants of massive mountains thrown up by the collision and their folded and crumpled rocks tell an important story of the shaping of Australia.



The Oscar, Napier, Emmanuel and Pillara Ranges are the remains of a vast coral reef, similar in scale to the Great Barrier Reef, that existed nearly 400 million years ago but is now high and dry in the landscape. The Gogo fish fossils from this ancient reef system provide a rare insight into the evolution of life on Earth, including the development of live birth and the earliest four-limbed vertebrates.

Dinosaur footprints on the west coast of the Dampier Peninsula are a remarkable remnant of ancient life in the Kimberley. Vertebrate palaeontologists and trace fossil experts consider that the range of prints and trackways found along the Kimberley coast, together with their environmental settings, is internationally outstanding. Fossil human footprint sites have also been found and are significant for being one of only three documented human track sites in Australia and the only evidence of human tracks in the west coast of Australia.

### **Biological richness**

The rugged Kimberley plateau, north-western coastline and northern rivers continue to provide a vital refuge for many native plants and animals that are found nowhere else or which have disappeared from much of the rest of Australia. In addition, Roebuck Bay is internationally recognised as one of Australia's most significant sites for migratory wading birds.

### **A rich and dynamic Aboriginal culture**

The west Kimberley has an Aboriginal history dating back at least 40,000 years and continues to be home to Aboriginal groups practising traditional law in the world's oldest continuous culture.

From the Dampier Peninsula east along the north Kimberley coast, Aboriginal people used the unique double log raft, *galwa* or *kalum*, and their remarkable knowledge of tidal movement, to travel to offshore islands and otherwise inaccessible coastal areas. In the Wanjinna–Wunggurr homeland, Wanjinna creator beings, manifested in rock art figures, stone arrangements and landscape features, are central to the laws and customs of the Wanjinna–Wunggurr people and guide every aspect of their lives. Painted images of creator beings, ancestors, plants and animals in rock shelters and caves represent a stunning visual record of an ongoing Aboriginal painting tradition that is considered one of the longest and most complex 'rock art' sequences anywhere in the world. The beautifully executed Gwion-Gwion/Girrigirro rock paintings of the Wanjinna–Wunggurr and Balangarra homelands provide an extraordinary insight into the material culture of Aboriginal society over thousand of years.

The history of Aboriginal people in the Kimberley has been one of resistance, adaptation and survival in the face of dramatic change. In the 1890's Jandamarra and the Bunuba people's intimate knowledge of the rugged Oscar and Napier Ranges was crucial in their struggle to resist European pastoral settlement. The dispute at Noonkanbah Station in 1980 between Aboriginal people, mining companies and the Western Australian Government over oil drilling in a sacred area was a pivotal event in the struggle by Traditional Owners for their right to determine what happens on their country.

## Early European exploration

The Kimberley coast was the scene of some of the earliest European exploration of the Great South Land. Privateer William Dampier's published accounts of his 1688 visit to the Kimberley were highly influential in the creation of European attitudes towards Australia and its people and stimulated later explorers such as James Cook. A carved boab at Careening Bay provides rare, physical evidence of the explorations of the eminent 19<sup>th</sup> century Australian hydrographer, Phillip Parker King.

## A rich pastoral history

The west Kimberley has a proud pastoral tradition, involving both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people. Fossil Downs Station was established in 1886 by the MacDonald brothers after a three year journey of more than 5,600 kms driving cattle from Goulbourn, NSW – the longest overlanding cattle drive in Australia's history.

## Pearling

Long before the arrival of Europeans, Aboriginal people along the west Kimberley coast collected the large, luminous pearl shell (*Pinctada maxima*) for use in rituals and ceremonies. It is the most widely distributed item in Aboriginal Australia, traded across two-thirds of the continent.

The first European report of pearl shell on the west coast of Australia was by William Dampier, who in 1699 noted its occurrence at Shark Bay, south of the Kimberley.

From 1850, European pearlers began to collect small shells in the area. When the world's largest pearl oyster shell was discovered in Roebuck Bay in 1861, it caused an international sensation. People flocked from many nations, hoping to make their fortune. By 1870, European pearling was becoming well established on the Kimberley coast.

The west Kimberley continues to hold a special place in the minds of Australians for the region's colourful pearling history.

The National Heritage List was established to list places of outstanding heritage significance to Australia. It includes natural, historic and Indigenous places that are of outstanding national heritage. The west Kimberley is the 96<sup>th</sup> place to be included on the National Heritage List.

Images on front page (L-R): Wandjina Rock Art site in the West Kimberley (Tourism Western Australia), Mitchell Falls (Brian Prince, DSEWPaC), Geikie Gorge (Brian Prince, DSEWPaC), Dinosaur footprint at low tide at Gantheaume Point, Broome (Tourism Western Australia), Boab trees at sunset near Derby Airport (Tourism Western Australia).