



Kakadu National Park

Kakadu National Park

Inscribed on the World Heritage List in 1981 (Stage 1);
1987 (Stage 2); and 1992 (Stage 3)

Kakadu National Park



Kakadu is a living cultural landscape, inhabited continuously by its Aboriginal traditional owners for more than 50,000 years.

The region's cave paintings, rock carvings and archaeological sites record their skills and way of life, from the hunter-gatherers of prehistoric times to the Aboriginal people – Bininj/Munggyu - who still live in the park today..

Kakadu is a unique mosaic of ecosystems, including tidal flats, floodplains, lowlands and plateaux, which provide habitat for a wide range of rare or endemic plants and animals.

Kakadu National Park was inscribed on the World Heritage List in three stages over 11 years, starting in 1981. It is one of the few sites included on the list for both outstanding cultural and natural universal values:

Natural

- as an outstanding example representing significant ongoing geological and biological processes
- as an example of superlative natural phenomena
- containing important and significant habitats for in situ conservation of biological diversity.

Cultural

- representing a unique artistic achievement
- being directly associated with living traditions of outstanding universal significance.

Kakadu is located in the tropical north of Australia, some 130 kilometres east of Darwin, and covers a vast 19,804 square kilometres.

The park stretches from the mangrove-fringed tidal plains in the north, through floodplains and lowland hills to the high sandstone cliffs of the spectacular Arnhem Land escarpment, through to the rugged stone country in the south. It protects almost the entire catchment of a large tropical river, another three river systems and examples of most of Australia's Top End habitats.

Kakadu's ancient escarpment and stone country spans more than two billion years of the earth's geological history. In contrast the riverine and coastal floodplains are more recent, dynamic environments, shaped by changing sea levels and the big floods every wet season.

This is a place of enormous biological diversity. Savannah woodlands, eucalypt and monsoon forests, rivers and billabongs, coastal beaches, mudflats and mangroves are home to a range of rare and endemic plants and animals.

There are 77 species of mammals (nearly a quarter of Australia's land mammals), 271 species of birds (more than one-third of Australian bird species), 132 reptiles, 27 species of frogs, 314 fish species, almost 1600 plant species and over 10,000 species of insects.

Kakadu's landscapes undergo dramatic seasonal changes. Wet season rains create a sea of shallow freshwater for hundreds of square kilometres, and saltwater crocodiles move swiftly upstream. As the floodplains start to dry, vast numbers of ducks, geese and wading birds flock to the rivers and billabongs. These extensive wetlands are listed under the *Convention on Wetlands of International Importance* (the Ramsar Convention).

More than 30 species of waders have been recorded on the wetlands, many being winter migrants from the sub-Arctic region. Kakadu is a major staging point within Australia for many migrating birds.

The wet also brings spectacular waterfalls to the 500 kilometre long Arnhem Land escarpment and new life to the rainforests in the ravines and plateau.

The rainforests are dominated by allosyncarpia trees, found only in this region. Rare birds such as the hooded parrot and white-throated grass wren live in the plateau's spinifex and woodland, and rare bats shelter in the escarpment caves. Restricted populations of animals such as the black wallaroo, the Oenpelli python and the giant cave gecko live around the isolated massive rock outliers, left behind when the escarpment eroded eastwards.



Kakadu's rivers meander to the Van Dieman Gulf, gradually depositing large quantities of silt to form extensive mudflats. These are inundated with salt water at high tide, and only salt-tolerant plants can grow here. Twenty-two species of mangroves form extensive mangrove swamps, important feeding and breeding grounds for many invertebrate species, fish (including barramundi) and birds.

Generations of Aboriginal people – known as Bininj/Mungguy – have lived and cared for this country for tens of thousands of years. Their deep spiritual connection to the land dates back to the Creation or Dreamtime.

Bininj/Mungguy believe that during the creation time ancestral beings known as the first people or *Nayahunggi* journeyed across the landscape. They came in many different forms – such as the Rainbow Serpent, *Bula* (Jawoyn Ancestor), *Namarrgon* (Lightning Man) and *Warramurrungundji* (Earth Mother). The ancestors created the landforms, plants, animals and Aboriginal people we see today, and they left language, ceremonies, kinship, and rules to live by. The cultural obligations and responsibility for country handed down by the ancestors are still central to the lives of Bininj/Mungguy, and age-old skills such as patch burning are integral to the modern management of the park.

Kakadu's Aboriginal rock art documents these creation stories. The paintings constitute one of the longest historical records of any group of people in the world, an outstanding record of human interaction with the environment over tens of thousands of years. Some 5,000 art sites have been recorded and a further 10,000 sites are thought to exist.

Concentrated along the escarpment, in gorges, and on rock outliers, the art sites display a range of styles including naturalistic paintings of animals and traditional x-ray art. Some galleries intriguingly capture the first contacts with non-Aboriginal people, from the Macassans in 17th century to the early European explorers in the 19th century.

Kakadu is jointly managed under the direction of a Board of Management, which has an Aboriginal majority representing the traditional owners. Day-to-day management is carried out by Parks Australia, a division of the Australian Government Department of the Environment, Water, Heritage and the Arts.



title page: Jim Jim Falls in flood

top strip: During the wet season, rivers and creeks flood and spread out over the broad floodplains to form vast wetlands

top: Mandy Muir runs a family tourism business, with Indigenous art and craft.

above: Rock art, Nourlangie. The Aboriginal art sites of Kakadu National Park provide an outstanding record of human interaction with the environment over tens of thousands of years

All images: DEWHA