Indigenous heritage at Australia’s northern and western pastoral frontiers

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Abstract

On the pastoral frontiers of northern and western Australia, generations of entangled lives of Aboriginal people with newcomers from Europe and Asia has created distinctive and sometimes difficult forms of Indigenous and historic heritage. Our paper draws on two case studies to explore some of these hidden aspects of pastoral heritage in remote and outback Australia. They are historic cattle stations and buffalo camps of what is now the World Heritage-listed Kakadu National Park in the Northern Territory, and the Canning Stock Route of Western Australia, a route corridor of contestation between European pastoral and mining interests, and the Indigenous people of the desert lands. Through the case studies, we explore the application of the concepts of cultural routes and cultural landscape and different management approaches to protecting and managing remote pastoral landscapes and routes. The paper also examines new forms of heritage practice that are being initiated where Western trained heritage practitioners are working collaboratively with remote Aboriginal communities in these case study areas.

Indigenous heritage of Australia’s pastoral frontier

At Australia’s northern frontier, a distinctive type of pastoralism was shaped by regional geography and climate, as well as the unique social and cultural mix of the ‘Top End’ community. The northern frontier is very different from down south, with a tropical climate, strong Asian influences, and later and more tenuous British influences as colonial power was consolidated. This paper explores the zones of conflict and resistance, alongside connections formed and areas of cooperation and collaboration, which typified cultural interaction on the stations and stock routes of the remote northern and western pastoral frontiers as discussed in the case studies of Kakadu National Park and the Canning Stock Route. The concept of contact zone, rather than frontier, highlights the space of colonial encounters, described by Mary Louise Pratt (as cited by Harrison 2004: 6) as:

the space in which peoples geographically and historically separate come into contact with each other and establish ongoing relations...by using the term ‘contact’ I aim to foreground the interactive improvisational dimensions of colonial encounters… [to emphasise] co-presence, interaction, interlocking understandings and practices, often within radically asymmetrical relations of power.

As Rodney Harrison (2004) argues, pastoral history was very much a contact zone of black and white Australians, which has created a shared heritage and landscapes. Historian Ann McGrath (1987: ix-x), describes the experience of being ‘born in the cattle’, and argues that far from being swamped by the cattle economy, Aboriginal people incorporated cattle life into their world, consciously adapting and integrating it. According to McGrath’s research, in the
sparsely settled north, Aborigine people had more survival options than in southern Australia: in such marginal country, success or failure depended on working the stations in new ways and learning from Aboriginal people. Working on the station provided Aboriginal people with access to new technologies: fast food that required little preparation; stimulants and equipment, as well as their traditional economic resources. ‘Cattle life’ also provided mobility and left free time for Aboriginal stock workers to participate in traditional activities on country (McGrath 1987: 20-23; Levitus 1982: 1; see also Harrison 2004: 32-33 for contact zones in New South Wales; and Paterson and Wilson 2009: 99-111 for Indigenous perceptions of contact in northwest Western Australia).

Cattle stations and buffalo camps of Kakadu National Park

In the former cattle stations and buffalo camps of what is now Kakadu National Park, historian Robert Levitus describes a ‘fossicking economy’ of small-scale and largely opportunistic economic activities which offered many opportunities for participation of Aboriginal people (Levitus 1982: 8; 1995: 64-93). According to Levitus, the Aboriginal people he interviewed as part of an extensive oral history project described the work performed on stations as an important feature of their lives, and while there was little luxury, the often hard conditions were shared by all. Survival of individual stations, such as Gimbat and Munmalary, now within Kakadu National Park, required a cooperative and skilled workforce. Station owners were often desperately short of labour and provided many incentives for Aboriginal people to ‘come in’ to the stations, setting up camp sites for working Aboriginal stockman and their families. Levitus recounts stories of the close bonds formed between individual stock workers and their families and the station owners. Many of the older generation of Bininj/Mungguy, the Aboriginal traditional owners of Kakadu, were born on the stations of what is now Kakadu National Park (Levitus 1995: 64-93; May, Blair & Levitus 2012: Appendix A).

There is no denying that there was racism, conflict and violence, with stock killing and reprisals, spearing and shootings and many Aboriginal deaths from European diseases. As historian Henry Reynolds (2013: 85-120) argues, this experience of violent conflict that we choose to ignore was ubiquitous throughout the continent with the expansion of European settlement. McGrath describes the ‘battle for the waterholes’ as a flash-point of early conflict throughout northern Australia. This was also very much the case on the Canning Stock Route in Western Australia, the second case study in this article. However, McGrath (1987: 20) also found that a conciliatory attitude was necessary on both sides for long-term survival.

Within Kakadu’s distinctive buffalo industry (see Cole 1988), Aboriginal labour, both male and female, was especially valued. Buffalo were originally imported from Timor into the early nineteenth century coastal settlements, and when these were abandoned, rapidly spread across the floodplains. By the late nineteenth century, Buffalo were being shot for their skins, and later for meat, which was exported to Asia. Buffalo shooting was a highly mobile industry, requiring little capital and benefitting greatly from Aboriginal labour, secured by food rations, tobacco and alcohol, or occasionally, money wages. Buffalo were shot by Aboriginal workers on horseback, skinned and then taken to a nearby billabong to be cleaned and salted by Aboriginal women for transport to Darwin.
It suited Aboriginal patterns of mobility, as shooting and processing was undertaken during the dry season from temporary camps or stations, with hunting and gathering to supplement station rations, and in the wet, Aboriginal workers returned to the traditional camp sites used by their people. Buffalo camps and stations, and processing abattoirs such as those at Munmalary and Mudginberri Stations, are an important and distinctive phase of Kakadu’s recent history (Levitus 1982: 13-21; 1995: 69-74; May, Blair & Levitus 2012: 116-122).

Esther Manakgu, Rose Nabobbob and Audrey Nadjowk, interviewed as part of the Kakadu National Park Historic Sites project in 2012, talk of travelling from Oenpelli mission (now Gunbalanya) to Munmalary and another local property, Cannon Hill, to work in the buffalo industry. Esther recalls that at one time, the missionaries would not let them smoke tobacco, so her family and many others went to Munmalary to camp for a few months, where she worked on cleaning the buffalo hides and putting salt on them to preserve them while they were transported to market, receiving tobacco and buffalo meat in payment. Rose’s father David Nabobbob worked for John Lord, owner of Munmalary, and Rose’s mother made bread at the homestead. Rose remembers ‘big mobs of ladies were skinning buffalo, which was hard work’ (May, Blair, & Levitus 2012: Appendix A).

Within Kakadu National Park, there are more than 100 individual historic sites, buildings, structures and landscapes, including 14 remaining former cattle stations, buffalo camps and processing sites (Godden Mackay 1994: 22-24; see also Troppo Architects & Forrest 1991). Most of the early stations on pastoral leases had an associated Aboriginal camp, where the Aboriginal stockmen, general hands and their families lived. Very few of these camps survive within the park in 2016.
The World Heritage inscription recognises Kakadu National Park as a mixed natural and cultural heritage site and also a living cultural landscape with highly significant rock art and ongoing Bininj/Mungguy cultural practices (Kakadu National Park Board of Management 2016: 188-191; UNESCO World Heritage Centre, 1992-2016, World Heritage List). The current cultural management plan for Kakadu recognises that the post-contact pastoral complexes and sites are important as focal points of visual and historic interest, with social values that demonstrate a range of Bininj/Mungguy (Aboriginal people of Kakadu) and Balanda (white colonists of the region) stories, identities and connections to the park (Kakadu National Park 2012: vol.1, 24-26). However, even while the park is jointly managed by the Native Title owners, Aboriginal community and the Australian Government, through the Director of National Parks, and these historic places and stories are regarded as very important, apart from mitigating the impact of threatening processes such as fire and insects, only very limited ongoing conservation has occurred, with Park resources largely going to infrastructure and tourism management (Kakadu National Park Board of Management 2016: 42).

Munmalary Homestead, which is the northern-most station in Australia and an important remnant of both beef production and buffalo hunting, one of the most enduring industries in the Top End, is a case in point. While the homestead complex is listed on the Northern Territory Heritage Register (Northern Territory Government 2012), the Munmalary Aboriginal Camp, which is an integral and significant part of the station, is not. While the Aboriginal camp has had some conservation works undertaken in the 1980s and 1990s, access and interpretation is very limited. Yet its history is an important part of contact history in the region.

The station owner of Munmalary in the 1960s and early 1970s, John Lord, had a fluctuating Aboriginal workforce of up to 21, and a reputation as a hard employer who often held back wages owed and provided poor accommodation and facilities (May, Blair & Levitus 2012: 92-98). Lord’s main Aboriginal worker, Toby Gangele, left because of repeated non-payment of wages, recalling Lord as a poor employer: ‘We start building a yard, putting the fence posts, right in the middle of the plain there. No shade, nothing… Oh, he was a hard man, really. Tell you what, all through the week we used to work, seven days a week…’ (Toby Gangele, interview with Robert Levitus 1 October 1981; May, Blair & Levitus 2012: 94).

Lord complained on several occasions that his Aboriginal workers left without notice, despite being paid a wage of $24 in cash each week plus keep, and being able to purchase two cans of beer at 30 cents each per night from his stores. More to the point, in his book published in 2006, Lord included a photo of himself on horseback equipped with rifle, revolver and a twenty foot length of rope, with the explanation:

Taken after I had returned with an Aboriginal from chasing several other Aboriginals who had run away from the Station. The ones we were chasing had abused my generosity and also the laws in respect of the other people in the camp, who asked that my companion and I chase the culprits and if possible bring them back. Thus the rope… Although we were in the middle of the twentieth century one has to remember that we were in a very isolated and primitive part of Australia where things occurred that would not have been acceptable in the more settled areas. Just imagine if these runaways ambushed and killed us both! What would have happened to my wife and children (Lord 2006; May, Blair & Levitus 2012: 96-97)?

In the 1970s, Munmalary was operated as part of Mudginberri Station, until buffalo catching-operations ceased in

Figure 4. Munmalary Homestead, Kakadu National Park. Source: Sandy Blair, August 2011.
1988. Part of the park since the 1980s, there has been limited maintenance of the Munmalary Homestead overall, such that in 2003, it was placed on the National Trust’s ‘Endangered Places’ List (although without any reference to the Aboriginal workers camp) because of its poor and deteriorating state of repair. Mudginberri Abattoir, the largest buffalo processing plant in the park, important in Australia’s labour movement history as the site of a significant industrial dispute, has been largely demolished and the site is not accessible or interpreted to visitors.

As in the Canning Stock Route case study which follows, local Aboriginal people very much want to be part of the ongoing management for these historic sites within the Kakadu National Park. As stated in the current cultural heritage management plan, ‘It is a high priority for Bininj/Mungguy that these stories within living memory should be recorded and shared with visitors so that they understand how Kakadu came to be how it looks today’ (Australian Government Director of National Parks 2012: 52-53). One bright spot is that the park has sponsored an oral history program to record these stories and places within living memory. However, currently there is very little interpretation of the recent history of the park, for example, pastoral stations, buffalo hunting, mining and safari camps. As park staff themselves recognise, a selection of these historic heritage sites should be open to the public, with stories being told, giving people an idea of Bininj/Mungguy and Balanda lives and interaction on the remote northern frontier. It is also apparent that, just as Kakadu itself is recognised as a living cultural landscape, these historic site complexes would benefit from a cultural landscape approach which considers whole complexes, connected by historic events and activities, in their landscape context, rather than isolated homesteads of would-be elite colonists.

Both Levitus and McGrath point to a feeling of nostalgia for the ‘golden age’ of the pastoral industry around the 1920s and 1930s (Levitus 1982: 1; McGrath 1987). Certainly many Aboriginal people who live in or near Kakadu National Park wish to see these stories recorded and re-told, both to young Bininj/Mungguy and visitors to the park, as an important record of former lives and cultural interactions of Bininj/Mungguy and Balanda in Kakadu’s recent past. The stories and memories are also part of the strong contemporary social connections Bininj/Mungguy feel for these former stations and camp sites, where their old people lived, family members were born and lived out their lives (May, Blair & Levitus 2012: 116-118; Kakadu National Park 2012: 52-53).

The social history of Aboriginal lives post-contact is part of the rich, if somewhat neglected, tangible and intangible cultural heritage of pastoral-era Kakadu. In another generation, the risk is that if we do nothing, these distinctive heritage site complexes and landscapes, with the associated memories and stories, will be lost forever. Notably, Aboriginal lives post-contact have not been part of our commemorated stories of nation building (Byrne and Nugent 2004: 5; Harrison 2004: 2-17). For example, the thematic history of pastoralism commissioned by the Australian Heritage Council has no entry in the index for Aboriginal workers, yet so much of the ‘hard yakka’ they refer to was done by Aboriginal stockmen and domestic workers, at least until the equal wages ruling of 1968 (Bunbury 2002: 4-11; Pearson & Lennon 2010). While there has been no systematic study of the contribution of these Aboriginal workers to this formative industry, it is an important part of the story of pastoral expansion in the Northern Territory and throughout the Australian continent.

**Canning Stock Route, Western Australia**

The second case study also highlights a neglected and somewhat confronting Aboriginal heritage on the pastoral frontier—this time through examining the challenges of managing the multiple heritage values of a former stock route, now traversing designated Aboriginal Native Title lands.

The Canning Stock Route was the longest historic stock route in Australia, almost 1900 kilometres stretching from Halls Creek in the north of Western Australia to Wiluna in the south of the state (Bianchi 2013: 10-12; National Museum of Australia 2010: viii). Constructed from 1908-10, the route cut across the traditional lands of the Aboriginal peoples of three major deserts; the Great Sandy, the Little Sandy and the Gibson Desert. Currently, under Native Title law, public access
to the stock route is regulated through permits issued by the regional Aboriginal association, Kuju Wangka. In a collaborative approach to management, Aboriginal rangers work alongside Western environmental scientists, archaeologists, anthropologists, historians and government officials to manage the many-layered cultural and environmental values of the stock route and its wider landscape. Its rich and entangled stories are interpreted by Aboriginal artists, filmmakers and story-tellers. A recent exhibition at the National Museum of Australia, ‘Yiwarra Kuju. The Canning Stock Route’, highlighted the collaborative and innovative aspects of this case study (National Museum of Australia 2010).

While many Australian stock routes cross vast tracts of country, few have remained as undeveloped and remote from towns or fuel stops as the Canning Stock Route. The Canning Stock Route, along with South Australia’s Oodnadatta and Strzelecki Tracks, and Queensland’s Birdsville Track, has never been bituminised and thus remains one of the iconic long-distance dirt tracks of the Australian outback (Blair 2000: 15-21; Blair et al 2002: 43-46; SA Department of Environment and Heritage 2002; Yelland 2002). With its strong history of cultural encounters along the route, the Canning is of potential interest as a cultural route of national, or even international heritage significance.

Originally constructed as a route for droving East Kimberley cattle to the booming mining towns of the western Australian goldfields, the dry desert crossing provided ideal conditions for the treatment of tick-infested cattle. It was short-lived as a stock route, even with 48 wells constructed during 1910, Canning Stock Route was used by drovers only irregularly until the late 1950s, after which cattle were sent to market by sea (Bianchi 2013; National Museum of Australia 2010: 33-37). Currently, it is a mecca for adventure-seeking travellers in heavy-duty 4 wheel drive (4WD) vehicles, who brave the harsh desert conditions.

**Contact zone of contestation**

The history of the Canning Stock Route might be considered as a corridor of contestation, as pastoral and mining interests asserted their rights to the scarce water resources of the Western Desert Aboriginal people, who resisted this intrusion. This approach builds on the contact zone idea and the unequal spread of power in colonial and post-colonial state encounters outlined in the previous Kakadu case study. It is notable that the track construction was marked by violent conflict between Aboriginal land owners and the intruding European surveyors and drovers (National Museum of Australia 2010: 33-37). The Australian nation state of the early 1900s did not recognise Aboriginal citizenship or traditional land ownership and it chose to ignore water and economic land use rights. The stock route was built in the hey-day of empire building and pastoral expansion, a prime example of ‘industrial capitalism’s disruptive, restricting activity’ (Clifford 1997: 2).

The initial impact of this north-south linear transect through the desert was the disruption of traditional west-east Aboriginal travel routes and access to water sources. This led to violent clashes and a largely forgotten history of resistance by Aboriginal people to European incursion (Bianchi et al. 2010; Reynolds 2013). In 1906, the surveying party led by Alfred Canning loaded up their camels not only with land survey equipment but also handcuffs and neck chains provided by the Wiluna police station. Anticipating conflict with Aboriginal people over water, Canning intended to capture local Aboriginal men and coerce them to lead the survey party to water sources (Bianchi 2013).

Martu elder Jeffrey James remembers the methods used:

Alfred Canning, grab Martu, hold him days, let him go and follow him up, and dug the well all the way along. [They call Canning] a hero. He was cunning …tricking [the] Martu. Alright, different history from me. Martu history is straightforward (National Museum of Australia 2010: 35).

The brutal methods used were challenged by the expedition’s cook, Edward Blake, who also criticised the survey team’s pursuit of Aboriginal women and destruction of ‘native’ wells. In 1908, his complaints led to a Royal Commission, entitled ‘The Treatment of Natives by the Canning Exploration Party’. The Commission found that:
Although the commissioners did not condone the chaining of natives under any circumstances, they felt Canning and his party were justified in doing so to ensure they had a water supply (Bianchi et al. 2010: xviv).

Clearly, the construction of the stock route at any cost to Aboriginal people had official sanction. As the drovers needed to water over 800 head of cattle each day, water sources had to be ample and a day’s walk apart, or approximately 24 kilometres. Of the 54 water sources along the route, Canning and his team constructed 48 wells from 1908 to 1910. Of these, 37 were built on, or near existing Aboriginal water sources, either destroying native wells or leaching accessible water from natural springs (National Museum of Australia 2010: 35). The wells were built like mine shafts, two by 12 metres (6 by 4 feet) rectangular shafts to a depth of 2.55 to 31.85 metres (8 to 104 feet), with straight boarded sides (Grimwade 1998: 73). Canning’s wells were inaccessible to Aboriginal people, who feared drowning if they climbed down, or injury if they tried using the hand windlass, which required three strong men to operate. Nomadic groups were generally comprised of a small family unit with only one adult male, so they were unable to raise water from the new deep wells.

Aboriginal people resisted the intrusion of the stock route into their lands, and attacks on the first surveying party resulted in the death of Tobin at Well 40 and later, in 1910, the killing of the first drovers at Well 37 (National Museum of Australia 2010: 35). Fearing attacks by Aboriginal people, drovers rarely used the route over the next twenty years. Local Aboriginal people continued crossing the stock route on their traditional west-east routes and by 1917, had damaged or destroyed most of the wells along the route (National Museum of Australia 2010: 36).

In 1929, when William Snell was commissioned by the government to recondition the wells, he noted the clear messages of Aboriginal anger at the imposition of this route and force used to police it:

…it would appear that the native disliked the whites for some reason. The cast iron pulley wheels were broken up by the natives and iron shoot taken from the well, stood alongside a bloodwood, a life sized policeman drawn on it, and bullnosed spear driven through his heart. This is the centre of large tribes (National Museum of Australia 2010: 36).

Snell attempted to facilitate Aboriginal access to the wells by adding ladders. By 1931, under Canning’s renewed leadership, the reconditioning was complete and from 1932 to 1959,
cattle were again moving along the desert corridor. In total there were only thirty-five cattle drives, the first in 1911 led by drover Tom Cole and the last by Mal Brown in 1959. The use of the stock route by the cattle industry represented a small economic return on enormous government expenditure to construct, maintain and police the wells along the route (Dwyer 2007; National Museum of Australia 2010: 33-37).

The route landscape

The Canning Stock Route was initially a thin line in the sand, a well-trodden camel pad which indicated the route taken by previous droving parties. Early stockman Len Hill, who travelled the route in 1946 with seasoned drover, Ben Taylor, wrote, ‘this bare pad lay like a fine thread across the vast red landscape connecting the wells in a north-easterly direction’ (Hill 2009: 32). In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, strings of camels were used for carrying food, water and equipment, enabling explorers, surveyors and drovers to traverse the harsh deserts of central and Western Australia. In 1906, twenty-three camels carried all the food, water and equipment for Canning’s first surveying party, and the camels were essential beasts of burden for the construction crews building the wells along the route.

The desert was and is criss-crossed by camel pads, forming clear pathways to waterholes. It is difficult to estimate the impact increasing numbers of feral camels had on reducing Aboriginal peoples’ capacity to find sufficient clean drinking water to survive. However, as the numbers of feral camels increased after 1940, the numbers of Aboriginal people living a nomadic lifestyle in the western deserts dramatically decreased (Edwards et al. 2008; Davenport et al. 2005). Today, camels are the most conspicuous wildlife seen by travellers along the Canning Stock Route and are the dominant feral species of Australia’s vast Western Desert region (McKnight 1969; Edwards et al. 2008). This story is not dissimilar to the effect of the buffalo originally imported from Timor to the early nineteenth century coastal settlements such as Port Essington, then spreading into the coastal and sub-coastal areas east of Darwin, now Kakadu National Park.

Aboriginal people ‘cleared out’ of the Western Desert

Several factors influenced the migration of Aboriginal people out of the bush into ration stations, missions and pastoral stations in the Western Desert between 1940 and 1965. Much like on the northern frontier, the initial contact with explorers and pastoralists was stimulated by curiosity, trade of stone for steel axes and knives, and also the supply of food rations during droughts. Anthropologist Bob Tonkinson has commented that the Martu ‘rapidly acquired a strong desire for tea, flour, twist tobacco and sugar—as several Martu have described it, “We were captured by flour and sugar” ’ (Davenport et al. 2005: 144).

The government created a system of Aboriginal Reserves across millions of acres of the Northern Territory, South Australia and Western Australia between 1918 and 1938. Martu and Puntu people along the Canning Stock Route moved into new lands, gravitating around ration stations that were taken over by missions during the 1940s-1950s. These included Jigalong, Balgo, Wiluna, Karalundi, La Grange and Cosmo Newberry. Mission funding by government depended on the numbers of ‘natives’, so they actively encouraged people to move in from the bush. In 1958, the 320 km wide Woomera rocket range crossed Western Australia to the north-west coast, directly threatening Martu people living to the east and west of the Canning Stock Route. During the 1960s, the Commonwealth Government appointed native patrol officers to
move Martu out of the impact zone prior to tests taking place. They worked with Martu guides from the missions to locate and bring in family groups (Davenport et al. 2005: 181). The State policy was initially non-interventionist, but changed in 1960 to pro-assimilation and supported bringing in natives to settlements (ibid: 174). By 1970, the deserts were effectively cleared out and the missions too were about to disappear, replaced by Aboriginal communities funded by various governments under the policy of self-determination (ibid: 181) Recent changes in government policy once again threaten these outstation communities.

Pastoral stations

Much like in the Kakadu case study, from the 1940s until the mid-1960s, Western Desert men and some women of working age sought work on pastoral stations, while their children and old people lived on the mission stations (Davenport et al. 2005). Aboriginal stockmen were highly valued by the frontier cattle industry as good horsemen who knew the country and its resources. Aboriginal women were often cooks and domestic servants in the homestead and gardens. Again, as in the Alligators River region that is now Kakadu, many stations depended on good relationships with the Aboriginal people living and working alongside European colonists. However, from 1968, when the equal wage ruling for the cattle industry by the Conciliation and Arbitration Commission came into force, the employment of large numbers of stockmen and station hands could not be sustained, and Aboriginal people moved off the stations, to government settlements or town fringe camps (Bunbury 2002).

Throughout this period, however, the Western Desert Aboriginal people retained strong spiritual connections to their country. In the period from 2001-2013, when Native Title rights were finally recognised along the Canning Stock Route, the route itself and its many side tracks provided ready access for Aboriginal people to once again live and work on their country.

Cultural heritage and tourism

Tourism has been increasingly popular along the Canning Stock Route since adventurer Michael Terry drove two, one ton Guy Half-track vehicles from Billiluna to Well 48 in 1925. The track was first driven its entire length by two Land Rovers in 1968, opening the route to private 4WD vehicles. It was estimated in 1998 that over 1,000 vehicles drove the route between May and August each year (Grimwade 1998:71).

Responding to increasing levels of tourism along the track, the Kuju Wangka Native Title holders recognised the need for a management plan:

Our plan is to implement a consistent management strategy, introducing a single permit system, constructing permanent and low-impact campsites and creating employment opportunities for Indigenous rangers. We are also developing culturally appropriate information about the region, to enrich the experience of tourists and teach them about the country they’re travelling through. (Yanunijarra Aboriginal Corporation n.d. Kuju Wangka).

Kuju Wangka approached experts in cultural and environmental management to collaborate with them on the development of this plan. In 2007, a diverse team of native title owners, Australian National University academics, and State and Federal land management and heritage officers, undertook a three year research project into the condition of sites of cultural and environmental heritage value along the Canning Stock Route. Few of these sites have existing heritage recognition at state or national level, though Aboriginal sites are given some protection under the Aboriginal Heritage Act 1972 (WA) (though this act is under review, with amendments proposed that may weaken the protection of Aboriginal sites, see Aboriginal Heritage Amendment Bill 2014). The complexity of the heritage values is reflected in the environmental surveys, research and recording of Aboriginal rock art and Jukurrpa (dreaming and ceremonial) sites, as well as the rich and multilayered pastoral history sites, landscapes and stories along the route. The WA Department of Land Information (previously Landgate), surveyed and mapped all of the historical features of the route as part of the collaborative research project.
The research project identified the urgent need to protect and manage cultural heritage places, and especially rock art sites, from deliberate damage by vandalism, souveniring of cultural material and also from periodic intense wildfires. Similar challenges arise around the protection of other historic material along the Canning Stock Route, including the wells, graves and other infrastructure associated with its history of pastoral use. While some wells have been restored by volunteer groups for use by tourists, many are no longer in use due to disrepair, or do not contain potable water.

**Kuju Wangka Management Strategy**

Kuju Wangka represents the traditional owners from five separate claim areas, who now hold native title over the vast majority of the country through which the Canning Stock Route travels. They are coordinating a cooperative approach to managing the Canning Stock Route along its entire length, guided by a management plan which crosses administrative, cultural and clan/language boundaries. Working at such a vast scale and with a complex layering of natural and cultural values can be extraordinarily challenging, and also very rewarding. The ranger groups involved in managing the cultural and natural heritage values along the route are constantly engaged in two-way learning and heritage management planning with researchers trained in Western science and traditional elders who have managed the land and its resources for many generations. A key focus of the overall management plan is to provide training for Indigenous youth in recording and documenting their heritage using up-to-date digital technology and databases. Today, young people are enthusiastically employed in these ranger teams working up and down the stock route (Central Desert Native Title Services n.d.; Yanunijarra Aboriginal Corporation n.d. Kuju Wangka).

The Kuju Wangka website provides a detailed information pack for travellers that explains the mix of Indigenous and non-Indigenous rights that govern use of the route (Yanunijarra Aboriginal Corporation, n.d. Kuju Wangka). Public ‘right of access’ exists over the historic stock route and a corridor either side of the Canning Stock Route. However, the current 4WD track deviates from the original historic track and enters Native Title lands, therefore permits are required by all travellers. The permits provide access to many of the heritage sites registered under the *Aboriginal Heritage Act 1972 (WA)*, particularly the wells and the area around them. The Canning Stock Route Visitor Information website (Yanunijarra Aboriginal Corporation n.d. Kuju Wangka) provides information on the Heritage legislation and the penalties for interfering with sites or artefacts. The permit systems enable Aboriginal rangers to more effectively manage the heritage sites and ensure acts of vandalism are reported while improving the facilities and safety of responsible travellers.

Native Title has enabled the relevant Aboriginal groups to close specific areas for reasons of cultural or natural heritage management. Public respect and recognition of Aboriginal management and the permit system along the stock route has importantly been fully endorsed by major organisations like the Four Wheel Drive Australia, Track Care Western Australia and the Australian National 4WD Council (Four Wheel Drive Australia, n.d.).

Through the Kuju Wangka management strategy, the management of the environmental and cultural values of the Canning Stock Route is developing as an ongoing collaboration between the Aboriginal Native Title holders and organisations that provide natural and cultural heritage management expertise. This forms an intriguing contrast with the Kakadu National Park case study, where despite joint

*Figure 7. Welcome to the Ngurrara Lands*
Source: Diana James 2010, courtesy ARC Canning Stock Route Project.
management arrangements and World Heritage Listing, some traditional owners think that too much emphasis is given to tourism, rather than cultural heritage management. In relation to the Canning Stock Route, it will be interesting to see if new and continuing partnerships with industry and research institutions willing to work alongside the traditional owners will enrich and expand the possibilities of two-way heritage management.

Yiwarra Kuju—One track, many stories

The story of the stock route has always been a long and colourful one. Capturing this, in his review of Phil Bianchi’s book *Work Completed, Canning—A Comprehensive History of the Canning Stock Route, 1906-2010*, Nicolas Rothwell (2014) comments that ‘…it seems as though the tracks were not so much a stock route as a space for tall tales’. In somewhat heroic tones, Bianchi (2013) recounts the stories of the surveyors, well construction and reconditioning teams, the cattlemen and drovers, and even bush poets who endured the isolation and physical hardship of the track during the droving days until 1959. Such tales eulogise the conquest of Australia’s tyranny of distance, epitomised by this iconic outback track.

Yet the story of the track depends on the storyteller. Central to the story of the heroic construction of the Canning Stock Route is one of the founding myths of white Australia, that the vast interior deserts are empty spaces. Archaeologist Macos Llobera, challenges this notion of space:

Space, or spaces, are no longer passive media but active agents. While practices leave their spatial—temporal imprint on the landscape, those same practices are “informed” by the already existing spatial order; the landscape fills up with spaces/places possessing various meanings and connotations (Llobera 1996: 612-22).

The stories told by Canning and the drovers did not fill an empty space. The voices of the first peoples were not heard nationally until an extraordinary exhibition, ‘Yiwarra Kuju, the art and history of the Canning Stock Route’, was mounted at the National Museum of Australia in 2010, and then toured nationally. These Aboriginal stories of place were told in oral history recordings, archival photographs and artefacts, modern film and acrylic paintings, as the Aboriginal peoples up and down the stock route told their stories in these varied media.

This exhibition and the accompanying book, *Yiwarra Kuju: The Canning Stock Route*, redrew the map of the stock route by foregrounding the pre-existing Aboriginal cultural routes that criss-crossed this country. As described by anthropologist John Carty:

‘In 2008 a senior man, Billy Patch (Mr P), sought to explain the deficiencies of Canning’s map, and modern tourist maps, by creating an alternative map of the desert Country the stock route bisected. He began by laying a network of horizontal and vertical lines through the sand. The intersecting points on the grid marked different Ngurra, camps or water sources, while the lines connecting them denote the songs sung for these sites and the journeys people took between them. It was a grid symbolising the cultural topography of the desert’(Carty 2010:27).

The cultural heritage of the Canning Stock Route is made up of many different peoples who have left their spatial-temporal imprints on this vast unforgivingly dry landscape. The story of scarce water in the desert connects them all. Again, Llobera sums up the cultural heritage of the dweller and the traveller:

The cultural landscape is the world as it is known to those who dwell therein, who inhabit its places and journey along the paths connecting them (Llobera 1996).

The thin red line of the stock route has a cultural heritage both shallow and deep, a surface line that transects and is engulfed by a multi-storied landscape of thick time and vast space. The route links many sites of importance to Indigenous and non-Indigenous people and its history is continually being added to by each new traveller.
A cultural landscape approach

With the recent recognition of the concept of cultural routes under the Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of the World Heritage Convention (UNESCO World Heritage Centre 2008), how does the Canning Stock Route measure up as a place of cultural significance at a national or even global level? Do concepts of cultural routes and cultural landscapes provide useful tools in heritage identification and management (UNESCO World Heritage Centre 2008 & 2015; ICOMOS 2011-2015)? In relation to the Kakadu case study, a cultural landscape approach is much more suited to capturing the interconnected and multi-layered historic site complexes in their landscape context, together with the stories and memories that keep these places alive and relevant today. In the case of the Canning Stock Route, the cultural route concept can encompass something of the dynamic and cross-cultural nature of the route in its landscape corridor, transecting three deserts and many earlier Aboriginal journeys and pathways. An assessment of its national heritage values would be a first important step to considering its World Heritage potential.

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