

# World Heritage Places - Kakadu National Park



Kakadu National Park was inscribed on the World Heritage List in three stages - 1981 (Stage 1), 1987 (Stages 1 and 2) and 1992 (Stages 1, 2 and 3).

Kakadu was one of 15 World Heritage places included in the National Heritage List under the *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999* on 21 May 2007.

Kakadu is one of four Australian sites included on the World Heritage List for both cultural and natural outstanding universal values. The floodplains of Kakadu illustrate the ecological effects of sea-level change in northern Australia. The park features great natural beauty and sweeping landscapes, as well as internationally important wetlands.

The region is extremely important to Aboriginal people, and many communities still live in the region. The Indigenous art sites of Kakadu are a unique artistic achievement that provides an outstanding record of human interaction with the environment over tens of thousands of years. These and the region's other Indigenous sites also illustrate globally significant example of the hunter-gatherer way of life, including its spiritual aspects and sites of great antiquity.

## Gallery

Click an image for a larger view.



- [More images of Kakadu National Park from the Australian Heritage Photographic Library](https://www.environment.gov.au/cgi-bin/heritage/photodb/imagesearch.pl?proc=search_results;placeid=105041)  
([https://www.environment.gov.au/cgi-bin/heritage/photodb/imagesearch.pl?proc=search\\_results;placeid=105041](https://www.environment.gov.au/cgi-bin/heritage/photodb/imagesearch.pl?proc=search_results;placeid=105041))

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**More information** (#a1)

## Koongarra

In recognition of its outstanding natural and cultural values, the Koongarra area was added to the Kakadu World Heritage Area on by the World Heritage Committee on 27 June 2011.

The 1,228 hectare Koongarra area was excluded from Kakadu National Park's original boundaries in 1979 because of its potential uranium resources, although no mineral exploration or mining rights were ever granted. Koongarra has strong cultural importance to the traditional owners, who do not want to see Koongarra mined and want the area added to the National Park and the World Heritage Area.

Koongarra looks out over Nourlangie Rock, famous for its rock art. The inclusion of Koongarra on the World Heritage List enhances the protection of more than 50,000 years of Indigenous history and culture.

The area also contains an upstream component of some of the Kakadu National Park's most important wetlands.

The inclusion of Koongarra into the Kakadu World Heritage area means that it will have protection under the *Environment Protection and Biodiversity and Conservation Act 1999*.

## Location

Kakadu is located in the tropical north of Australia, 130 kilometres east of Darwin, and covers a vast 19,804 square kilometres. The addition of Koongarra brings the total area of the World Heritage Area to over 19,816 square kilometres.

## Description of place

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 *Warramurrungudji* (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 by the Australian Government Director of National Parks in conjunction with 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 Sustainability, Environment, Water, Population and Communities.

### Outstanding Universal Value (#a2)

- [World Heritage Committee information for Kakadu National Park](http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/147) (<http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/147>)

## Brief synthesis

Kakadu National Park is a living cultural landscape with exceptional natural and cultural values. Kakadu has been home to Aboriginal people for more than 50,000 years, and many of the park's extensive rock art sites date back thousands of years. Kakadu's rock art provides a window into human civilisation in the days before the last ice age. Detailed paintings reveal insights into hunting and gathering practices, social structure and ritual ceremonies of Indigenous societies from the Pleistocene Epoch until the present.

Kakadu is one of the largest national parks in Australia and one of the largest in the world's tropics, Kakadu preserves the greatest variety of ecosystems on the Australian continent including extensive areas of savanna woodlands, open forest, floodplains, mangroves, tidal mudflats, coastal areas and monsoon forests. The park also has a huge diversity of flora and is one of the least impacted areas of the northern part of the Australian continent. Its spectacular scenery includes landscapes of arresting beauty, with escarpments up to 330 metres high extending in a jagged and unbroken line for hundreds of kilometres.

The hunting-and-gathering tradition demonstrated in the art and archaeological record is a living anthropological tradition that continues today, which is rare for hunting-and-gathering societies worldwide. Australian and global comparisons indicate that the large number and diversity of features of anthropological, art and archaeological sites (many of which include all three site types), and the quality of preservation, is exceptional.

Many of the art and archaeological sites of the park are thousands of years old, showing a continuous temporal span of the hunting and gathering tradition from the Pleistocene Era until the present. While these sites exhibit great diversity, both in space and through time, the overwhelming picture is also one of a continuous cultural development.

**Criterion (i) :** Kakadu's art sites represent a unique artistic achievement because of the wide range of styles used, the large number and density of sites and the delicate and detailed depiction of a wide range of human figures and identifiable animal species, including animals long-extinct.

**Criterion (vi) :** The rock art and archaeological record is an exceptional source of evidence for social and ritual activities associated with hunting and gathering traditions of Aboriginal people from the Pleistocene era until the present day.

**Criterion (vii) :** Kakadu National Park contains a remarkable contrast between the internationally recognised Ramsar-listed wetlands and the spectacular rocky escarpment and its outliers. The vast expanse of wetlands to the north of the park extends over tens of kilometres and provides habitat for millions of waterbirds. The escarpment consists of vertical and stepped cliff faces up to 330 metres high and extends in a jagged and unbroken line for hundreds of kilometres. The plateau areas behind the escarpment are inaccessible by vehicle and contain large areas with no human infrastructure and limited public access. The views from the plateau are breathtaking.

**Criterion (ix) :** The property incorporates significant elements of four major river systems of tropical Australia. Kakadu's ancient escarpment and stone country span more than two billion years of geological history, whereas the floodplains are recent, dynamic environments, shaped by changing sea levels and big floods every wet season. These floodplains illustrate the ecological and geomorphological effects that have accompanied Holocene climate change and sea level rise.

The Kakadu region has had relatively little impact from European settlement, in comparison with much of the Australian continent. With extensive and relatively unmodified natural vegetation and largely intact faunal composition, the park provides a unique opportunity to investigate large-scale evolutionary processes in a relatively intact landscape.

Kakadu's indigenous communities and their myriad rock art and archaeological sites represent an outstanding example of humankind's interaction with the natural environment.

**Criterion (x) :** The park is unique in protecting almost the entire catchment of a large tropical river and has one of the widest ranges of habitats and greatest number of species documented of any comparable area in tropical northern Australia. Kakadu's large size, diversity of habitats and limited impact from European settlement has resulted in the protection and conservation of many significant habitats and species.

The property protects an extraordinary number of plant and animal species including over one third of Australia's bird species, one quarter of Australia's land mammals and an exceptionally high number of reptile, frog and fish species. Huge concentrations of waterbirds make seasonal use of the park's extensive coastal floodplains.

## Integrity

The property encompasses all the natural and cultural attributes necessary to convey its outstanding universal value. The joint management regime in place with Kakadu's Indigenous owners, including consideration of grazing and the development of a controlled burning and management policy, significant research and monitoring activities, and a strong visitor education programme are essential to the maintenance of the integrity of the property. The rock art and archaeological sites are not under threat.

The natural attributes of the property are in good condition, with pressures from adjacent land uses, invasive species and tourism needing ongoing attention. Some past land degradation from small-scale mining and over-stocking that occurred in the area that was included in the property in 1992 has been addressed through restoration measures.

As is the case for many protected areas, the straight-line boundaries of Kakadu are artificial ones. They relate to a long history of administrative land use decisions with the Northern Territory Government and the Arnhem Land aboriginal reservation. Although the South Alligator River drainage basin is contained within the park, headwaters of other rivers lie outside. The boundaries are adequate, although in an ideal world, ecological/hydrological criteria would allow a different configuration and might also include the drainage basin of the East Alligator River in Arnhem Land which would add additional values and integrity to Kakadu. There are also important natural values in the Cobourg Peninsula and in some of the coastal wetlands to the west of the park.

There are mining interests adjacent to the property, and the long-term aspects of waste disposal and eventual recovery required ongoing attention and scrutiny. In addition to the uranium mine at Ranger, which is excised from the property, there is one other

excised lease at Jabiluka which is located close to an important floodplain inside the park. A third previously excised area at Koongarra was incorporated into the property in 2011, at the request of the State Party and the Traditional Owner.

## Authenticity

Large areas of Kakadu are virtually inaccessible to people other than the Indigenous traditional owners, and the Indigenous and non-Indigenous national park managers. Cultural sites are therefore subject to little interference. The Indigenous community, in conjunction with the national park managers, has developed a range of programs to manage any possible threats from weathering and/or damage to anthropological, art and archaeological sites.

## Protection and management requirements

The property is well protected by legislation and is co-managed with the Aboriginal traditional owners, which is an essential aspect of the management system. The Director of National Parks performs functions and exercises powers under the *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999* (the Act) in accordance with the park's management plan and relevant decisions of the Kakadu National Park Board of Management. A majority of Board members represent the park's traditional owners. These arrangements ensure that the park has effective legal protection, a sound planning framework and that management issues are addressed.

The Act protects all World Heritage properties in Australia and is the statutory instrument for implementing Australia's obligations under the World Heritage Convention. It aims to protect the values of the World Heritage properties, including from impacts originating outside the property. By law, any action that has, will have, or is likely to have, a significant impact on the values of the World Heritage property, must be referred to the responsible Minister for consideration. Penalties apply for taking such an action without approval, and the Act has been tested in court in relation to protection of the values of World Heritage properties. Once a heritage place is listed, the Act provides for the preparation of management plans which set out the significant heritage aspects of the place and how the values of the site will be managed. In 2007, Kakadu was added to the National Heritage List, in recognition of its national heritage significance under the Act.

The quality of the park's management and protection has been widely recognised. Key management issues that have been identified include:

- *Tourism* – significant increase in visitation as a result of its World Heritage inscription. Visitors are encouraged to enjoy the park in ways that do not adversely affect its natural and cultural values;
- *Mining* – management of abandoned small-scale uranium mining sites and monitoring the existing Ranger mine lease. A rehabilitation program has been completed to reduce the physical and radiological hazards of old mine sites. The future potential effects on the park of current uranium mining will require ongoing scrutiny;
- *Cultural sites* – work to conserve rock art sites in the face of natural and chemical weathering from increasing age and damage from water, vegetation, mud-building wasps, termites, feral animals and humans;
- *Introduced flora* – ongoing management to control and prevent the spread of introduced weeds (particularly *Mimosa pigra* and *Salvinia molesta*); and
- *Introduced fauna* – removal of Asian water buffalo and the resulting restoration of affected ecosystems.

Since the 1991 nomination, additional threats to World Heritage values have emerged, including:

*Climate change* – saltwater incursions into freshwater ecosystems, changing fire seasons and regimes and an increased potential for spread of exotic flora and fauna. Park managers are implementing a climate change strategy for the park that recommends a range of adaptation, mitigation and communication actions to manage the anticipated consequences of climate change;

*Decline of small mammals across northern Australia* – the causes of decline are unclear however initial theories suggest fire management regimes, feral cats and introduction of disease as the likely causes; and

*Cane Toads* – rapid colonisation by cane toads. Monitoring programmes are in place to determine cane toad distribution and the impacts on native wildlife within different habitats of the park. There are no known methods to manage populations of cane toads

over large areas; however the Australian Government is undertaking research into potential control and adaptation options.

## Resources (#a3)

## Listing information

- [Location/Boundary plan \(PDF - 389.8 KB\)](#)  
(/sites/default/files/env/pages/bf8cd0a7-1fd2-4202-a62d-b998a4d93cb7/files/kakadu-map.pdf)
- [Koongarra location \(PDF - 410.71 KB\)](#)  
(/sites/default/files/env/pages/bf8cd0a7-1fd2-4202-a62d-b998a4d93cb7/files/koongarra-map.pdf)
- [Gazettal notice \(PDF - 67.56 KB\)](#)  
(/sites/default/files/env/pages/bf8cd0a7-1fd2-4202-a62d-b998a4d93cb7/files/10569401.pdf)
- [Australian Heritage Database record for this place](#)  
(https://www.environment.gov.au/cgi-bin/ahdb/search.pl?mode=place\_detail;place\_id=105041)

## Addition of Koongarra - 27 June 2011

Koongarra was added to the Kakadu World Heritage area on 27 June 2011. Mr Jeffrey Lee, Koongarra senior traditional owner of the Djok (Gundjeihmi) clan, was in Paris to witness the decision and while there made a statement to the World Heritage Committee thanking them for inscribing Koongarra into the Kakadu World Heritage area. A copy of his statement is below.

- [Statement to the World Heritage Committee by Mr Jeffrey Lee \(PDF - 109.47 KB\)](#)  
(/sites/default/files/env/pages/bf8cd0a7-1fd2-4202-a62d-b998a4d93cb7/files/jeffery-lee-statement.pdf) | [\(RTF - 13.24 KB\)](#) (/sites/default/files/env/pages/bf8cd0a7-1fd2-4202-a62d-b998a4d93cb7/files/jeffery-lee-statement.rtf)
- [Map: Koongarra site within the Kakadu National Park World Heritage Area \(PDF - 410.71 KB\)](#)  
(/sites/default/files/env/pages/bf8cd0a7-1fd2-4202-a62d-b998a4d93cb7/files/koongarra-map.pdf)

## Photos



Jeffrey Lee thanking the World Heritage Committee for inscribing Koongarra onto the World Heritage List.



Jeffrey Lee and Stewart Gangali outside UNESCO Headquarters in Paris after Koongarra was inscribed on the World Heritage List.

## Relevant links

- [Australia's Commitments: Protecting Kakadu - Progress Report to the Bureau of the World Heritage Committee - 15 April 2000 \(PDF - 102.25 KB\)](#) (/sites/default/files/env/pages/bf8cd0a7-1fd2-4202-a62d-b998a4d93cb7/files/kakaduapril.pdf)
- [Kakadu Factsheet \(PDF - 402.59 KB\)](#) (/sites/default/files/env/pages/bf8cd0a7-1fd2-4202-a62d-b998a4d93cb7/files/kakadu-factsheet.pdf)
- [Protected Planet Database - Kakadu National Park World Heritage Site](#) ([http://www.protectedplanet.net/sites/Kakadu\\_National\\_Park\\_World\\_Heritage\\_Site](http://www.protectedplanet.net/sites/Kakadu_National_Park_World_Heritage_Site))
- [Kakadu National Park](#) (/parks-heritage/national-parks/kakadu-national-park.)
- [World Heritage Committee information for Kakadu National Park](#) (<http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/147>)