People have actively protected the Kimberley over millennia and maintained a rich landscape with species found nowhere else on earth. We pay tribute to them. Over the past few decades, the local community got together to ensure this magnificent region, particularly the west Kimberley, wasn’t turned into an industrial and urban conglomeration like nearly everywhere else in the world. As more destructive developments came, the community pushed back. In 1996, a band of three got together around a kitchen table in Broome to take action to protect the Fitzroy River from dams and cotton farms by supporting traditional owners to defend their Country. Environs Kimberley (EK) was born.
From humble beginnings, EK has evolved into one of the country’s premier regional conservation organisations, with over 16,000 supporters and growing. We take the protection of the globally significant environment here extremely seriously. We won’t shy away from the biggest multi-national corporations, hostile governments and billionaires if their proposals threaten the integrity of the world’s most intact tropical savannah and the least spoiled coastline in the world.

Over the past 25 years we have stood strong for Country alongside traditional owner groups, the broader community and other environmental and Aboriginal organisations. We have successfully protected vast areas from industrialisation, letting the world know that the Kimberley is far too valuable to be destroyed for financial gain by people and shareholders who don’t live here and won’t have to witness the legacy of disappearing species, polluted water and savannah lost forever.

Not only do we defend the Kimberley’s vast landscapes, we also actively support traditional owner groups to live and work on Country. In the last eight months alone we have secured $1.7 million for traditional owner groups to look after Country, revitalise languages, develop sustainable economic opportunities and instigate healing programmes.

We have worked with Aboriginal ranger groups across the Kimberley since 2003. We are privileged to have done so together. By combining Traditional Ecological Knowledge or Aboriginal Science with Western Science, we have dramatically increased the documented knowledge of Kimberley ecosystems, plants and animals, and developed management plans to ensure their protection into the future.

Our success has come through collaboration and partnerships, and by building networks of knowledge and people, not just across the Kimberley but nationally and globally. No one can defend this place alone. We are a small population in a region twice the size of Victoria. Working together is the only way to hold back the forces that would destroy vast areas of the Kimberley, if we let them.

We need to celebrate our successes and build on what we’ve achieved. The fight is not over, it’s just beginning. Here are some of the wins over the past 25 years, gained with the support of our members, donors, the EK Board, dedicated professional staff, partner organisations including Aboriginal ranger groups and grant providers, and the broader community.

In 1996, plans were set for three dams on the Fitzroy: at Dimond Gorge, the Margaret River Gorge and the Leopold River. To water over 200,000 hectares of genetically modified cotton. Traditional owners were horrified. The community mobilised, joining the small band of plucky volunteers who were EK at the time, to protect the river. Plans to destroy the river and savannah had brewed for more than a century. It took eight years of hard work and campaigning until the three-dam proposal was dropped. In 2005, Colin’s Caroll came back to haunt the river, but this idea, to take water from the Fitzroy to drought-prone Perth, evaporated almost as quickly as a wet season shower when the Opposition, led by Colin Barnett, lost the election that year.

When exploration for a kaolin mine was proposed on Thargoo pastoral lease, we stood with the pastoralists and traditional owners and objected. The proposal was withdrawn 2005, when Woodside and its joint venture partners Shell, BP, BHP and Chevron proposed building a gas refinery at Quondong, 30km north of Broome. The proposal morphed into a 35km² industrial site at James Price Point. When we asked the Premier Colin Barnett, who returned to power in 2006, what his response was that they could be, as long as they were distant from the gas refinery. This fitted in with the 2006 State Government plan to industrialise vast areas of the Kimberley. After years of opposition, most notably from the Broome Community Seagrass Monitoring Project, in partnership with traditional owners and the state government. We pushed hard, successfully, to shut down the commercial fisheries and develop a marine park in the Bay, and we’ll continue to lobby for a sanctuary zone.

Oil and gas companies have been working to turn the southern Kimberley into oil and gas fracking fields since 2010. Along with traditional owners and other groups we’ve kept this polluting industry out. The push is on again, with Texan fracking companies pushing fracking 20 km’s. With your support, we won’t let that happen.

After successfully fending off the push for dams on the Fitzroy, we are dismayed to know that the river is once again under threat — from huge pumps, extensive landclearing and all that led to the Murray—Darling disaster. We are working with traditional owners to protect the river once and for all. Make sure you sign the submission to the government on our website.

As long as we have support and funding we will continue to be a watchdog for the region. We’ll campaign strongly to protect the Kimberley’s precious environment and promote new sustainable industries to strengthen communities and help people to live and work on Country. Here’s to the next 25 years!
It’s early August and, in the Kimberley, we’re more than mid-way through the dry season — a time when, in an average year, the size of Broome is said to treble as some 25–30,000 tourists venture here. In 2021, however, as the pandemic and its resultant border closures persist, we’ve experienced a greater explosion in visitor number than ever. We hear reports of more than 70,000 people in the town. No doubt many of these holidaymakers would be spending the winter break, but for COVID-19, in a ‘normal’ year, but for now, with no community transmission and open travel within WA, they’re flocking here on planes and in flashy gargantuan 4WDs that have eclipsed the usually dominant backpacker vans and the caravans of grey nomads.

It was during all of this that I read with great surprise of the Federal Minister for Environment Sussan Ley’s recent policing trip to Europe (Hungary, France, Spain, Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Middle East (Oman) and South Asia (the Maldives). Moved to action by UNESCO’s World Heritage Committee’s decision to recommend that the Great Barrier Reef be listed as ‘in danger’ (given three mass coral-bleaching events in five years, and sluggish progress in cutting pollution from farms and properties), the Minister undertook a round of vigorous lobbying for voting countries to reject the recommendation.

Reco...
Ruminating with MAD COW

NOSTALGIA

I recently listened to a radio broadcast about nostalgia. Although the presenter tried not to sound judgemental, the subtext was clear: that nostalgia is an indulgence by older people who can’t accept the happy present and misguidedly think the past was better. Such people are casting a rosy light on their childhood memories, giving them a glow that wasn’t there at the time.

There may be some of that — most of us think that our childhoods were happy. But what if the Nostalgics are right? What if the past really was better than the present? Allow me to list a few objective differences between my childhood years and now.

As you have probably heard before, children were much freer. We walked to school with friends, finding safety in numbers. From the age of seven or eight, armed with parental warnings against talking to strangers, we could go out on our own in daylight hours and play, unsupervised, with children we met in the park. That’s no longer legal. At weekends or holidays, we jumped on the milkman’s cart and helped him deliver milk to people’s doorsteps. No milkman whose milk I delivered turned out to be a paedophile. This will surprise some adults nowadays, when any man who shows a tolerance of children, let alone a liking for them, is suspect. No more riding on milk carts, which have, in essence, gone the way of the horse and buggy. We played with ‘tin’ soldiers, made partly of lead. I have, in any case, gone the way of the horse and buggy. No one had heard of Foetal Alcohol Syndrome. It may have existed, rare, unrecognised and unnamed, but there was no epidemic of it, as there is today.

The world was cooler. There were forests, tomatoes had flavoured milk bottles in glass ones that could be returned for cash, to be cleaned and re-used. Phones were answered by human beings.

True, we didn’t have the convenience of electronic devices people are addicted to these days, but instead we had leisure. We had time to sit and read, or think, or watch birds cavorting in the bird-bath. We had time for hobbies. We were not disturbed every few minutes by an insistent ‘Ping!’ A phone was a luxury item that never required your attention. When you used it, it returned to its box, ready for the next use — whereas the new smartphones are simply glowing boxes that demand your immediate attention.

So this is partly why EX exists. While we make our own strenuous efforts to repair the nature around us, we also strive to let people know about the plight of the endangered Hopping Mouse and its counterparts. We try to help them understand that we are living in an age of extinctions and, despite strenuous efforts to repair the nature around us, we will probably not be able to save all the species we have lost in the past 500 years. The Tasmanian Government is in thrall to the salmon farmers, willing to change laws rather than enforce them when the industry ignores them.

A bit contrary to what can happen when government and industry are in one another’s pockets. Recommended reading, with a warning: it is likely to put you off Tasmanian salmon for good.
Natural wonders of Roebuck Bay now on iNaturalist

Elsa Fuentes-Hare

The mudflats of Roebuck Bay are a haven for seagrass meadows and the species that live in them. Though seagrass monitoring is not a new activity in the bay, the Broome Community Seagrass Monitoring Project (CMP) has now established an iNaturalist page.

The CMP brings volunteers together at low tide for dawn and afternoon surveys of the species present on the mudflats of Nagulagun Buri, Yawuru sea country. Regular monitoring, which has been occurring since 2006, is crucial in assessing the health of the nurseries and habitats provided by the seagrass meadows, and in detecting any changes in their condition. Monitoring of this kind is being carried out on a global scale through Seagrass-Watch, an international effort to monitor, conserve and raise awareness about the health of seagrass habitats. The Broome surveys were conducted in Roebuck Bay at Town Beach (RO1), Demco (RO2), Port Slipway (RO3) and at Black Ledge (RO4) — those codes can be found on the seagrass watch map online. The mudflats here have an unparalleled benthic species richness, and are Ramsar-listed as a wetland of international significance. Seagrass meadows are crucial on many scales: globally as carbon sinks, locally for ngangarr (dugong). In order to maximize the impact of the surveying done in Roebuck Bay, the species that were photographed are being uploaded to iNaturalist, a citizen science network where members of the public can share species observations and classify them.

The new Broome CMP iNaturalist page features 20 species identified from the February surveys, with numbers expected to grow after the recent July surveys. From bristle worms to brittle stars, to sea anemones and sea squirts, the observations stretch across the animal kingdom. Many of these creatures are very small, and demand a careful and patient eye: the dedicated observer is rewarded with the strangeness of the animal world, and if you are chasing gold, you may even be rewarded with a sand dollar! Public citizen science efforts like iNaturalist help add depth to the knowledge about Roebuck Bay, though it is fair to say we are barely scratching the surface. If this has sparked your interest, please check out the Naturalist site, or even consider uploading your own observations. The next surveys will take place from the 5th to the 8th of November.

Kimberley Weeds Network’s online success

Danielle Bain

Weeds are one of the major threats to the nature of the Kimberley. Lots of people are working towards managing Kimberley weeds better, but there are many challenges. The difference between organisations in approaches to weed management can be stark, depending on funding and politics. We recognised at the 2015 Weeds Forum that it is important to get together to discuss Kimberley weeds, which can be forgotten by centralised decision-makers. We need to work together to share knowledge if we want to have Kimberley weeds recognised as the major threats that they are.

Over the past year, we have been working hard to establish the Kimberley Weeds Network. The original aim was to get together for a weeds forum in May 2021, but this was cancelled because of uncertainty around the dreaded Covid; however, thanks to the wonders of technology, we were able to continue taking weeds online. We quickly discovered the advantages of this and forged ahead with regular online mini-forums.

These online forums became a chance to connect researchers, weed officers and managers, rangers and interested weedos across the Kimberley and beyond, allowing them to share information, and giving them the opportunity to collaborate without having to be in the same room. We were able to meet more often and we didn’t spend time and money travelling to a central location. Of course, nothing beats a face-to-face meeting, but we have realized the benefits of using online tools and we will certainly use them more in the future.

More successes for the Kimberley Weeds Network include the weeding days in Broome in May/June 2021. Kylie Weatherall put on a spread for the volunteers, who came out in droves for the community ‘weed warrior’ day at Minyirr Park. The hard-working volunteers removed 200m of vines that were smothering our endangered Monsoon Vine Thickets.

If you would like to join the conversation and learn more about the Kimberley Weeds Network, have access to our recordings of the mini-forum presentations, be able to download the weeds newsletters and find out more about our weeding days, go to www.environskimberley.org.au/kimberley_weeds_network.

Thanks to Western Australian Government’s State Natural Resource Management Program and The Australian Government’s National Landcare Program for funding this important work. We look forward to talking with our partners online about weeds in the Kimberley, and making the most of this opportunity to collaborate and improve our regional voice.
When the McGowan Government lifted the moratorium on fracking in 2018, it designated the Kimberley as one of the two areas where fracking would be permitted into the future. Whilst fracking was banned in the Perth, Peel and South West regions, many Traditional Owners felt it was inequitable that their homelands were left open for this destructive industry. A large group of Mangala Traditional Owners decided to make a stand against this decision, which leaves their country at threat. They came to EK and Lock the Gate with the idea of holding a festival.

Kimberley Calling – A Frack Free Kimberley concert

Shaun Clark

Over many meetings with Mangala Traditional Owners, decisions were made to host a concert at Cable Beach and invite local and other supportive musicians to celebrate what a wonderful place the Kimberley is, with the largest, almost intact tropical savannah left on the planet — no place for large-scale industrialisation.

Kimberley Calling – A Frack Free Kimberley concert was born. Musicians and speakers were invited, organisation began between groups of volunteers, applications were sought from authorities. At 2pm on the 17th July, all parts of the careful design came together beautifully. As the crowd arrived the atmosphere grew, the wonderful music bellowed across the amphitheatre and the kids played like there was no tomorrow. Between the sets, powerful speeches set the tone, raising awareness against the fracking industry getting a foothold in the Kimberley and potentially destroying an amazing, biodiverse landscape and custodians’ homelands for tens of thousands of years, as well as ruining the future for the development of sustainable industries.

An exceptional feeling of solidarity carried across the entire evening, with a powerful finish by John Butler, who had been personally invited by the Mangala people. A huge thank-you to all the musicians: Albert and Woody Gray, Mama Kin, Wil Thomas, Tania Ransom, Olive Knight, Clifton Gitgab, Sarah Mortimer, the Mexicans, John Butler and Stephen Pigram, who joined us at the end.

A massive thank-you to Bart Pigram for his charismatic role as the M.C, Marjardee for her welcome to country, Martin Pritchard, Micklo Corpus and most powerfully Nuria Jadai for their stirring speeches, and other Mangala family members who were on the big screen. To the PAKAM network for their newly acquired stage and the team, Treppo Sound, event organisers and production management, with a special mention of Andrew Chambers for his efficiency; the Shire of Broome, which was wonderfully accommodating, and the food vendors — a huge thanks. Finally, a heartfelt thank-you to all the volunteers with their devotion to supporting events that help raise awareness of threats to the amazing and unique Kimberley region; the roles you play are invaluable in making such wonderful celebrations a success. Frack Free Kimberley!
Detecting species through eDNA

Matt Macdonald

The Bunuba community has stressed the importance of the Garuwa (freshwater) places on their country, the springs, waterholes and rivers. People visit Garuwa places for camping and milhilibinyi (hunting and fishing); some of these sites hold immense cultural and spiritual significance, being the resting places of creator beings, and are interconnected sites (songlines) as outlined in Jalangurru Muwayi: Bunuba Healthy Country Plan 2018. The Bunuba community wants to develop a monitoring program for Garuwa places, incorporating the best of cultural and scientific approaches.

Environmental DNA (eDNA) is an emerging technique for biodiversity surveys. As animals swim in or drink from water they leave behind DNA in the form of skin, feathers and other tissue. The method involves collecting water samples, then analyzing them to see what DNA is in the water. This DNA is then compared to sequences from previously studied species. Sampling eDNA offers the possibility of rapidly detecting many species simultaneously, which can be much easier and quicker than other methods (e.g. fishing or netting) and has the advantage of potentially detecting animals otherwise difficult to find.

Twelve Garuwa places were sampled in the late dry season 2020 by Bunuba Rangers and EK staff, to test the use of eDNA in the Kimberley: six sites in October before the onset of wet season rains, and six in December after Fitzroy Crossing had recorded between 80 and 150 mm rainfall.

DNA from 36 types of vertebrate animal was detected across the twelve sites, including 17 types of fish, four frogs, eight birds and four mammals, as well as freshwater crocodile and two types of freshwater turtle. Two fish; Bunda (spangled perch) and Wolmarri (rainbowfish) were detected at all twelve sites. Twenty-seven types of animals were detected across the six samples taken prior to the onset of the wet season (sampled October 2020), while 20 types were detected from the six samples taken after the rains had started (sampled December 2020). The sample with the greatest number of animal types detected was from the Brooking Creek site. Just below the confluence of Brooking Creek and Homestead Creek, with 16 animal types recorded from this site alone.

More types of aquatic animal (i.e. fish, crocodile and turtle) were detected in the October sampling than the December sampling, indicating that such species may be harder to detect after heavy rain. In contrast, all frog detections were from samples taken after rainfall, presumably a result of increased activity of these species (particularly spawning) in response. No clear patterns in the detectability of bird and terrestrial mammals were obvious with the current sample size.

Many Kimberley species remain understudied, which means that a large number of DNA sequences could only be matched at Genus or Family level, limiting the interpretation of our results. It is also evident that we missed many well-known species from the Garuwa sites, the most obvious being Clark’s freshwater crocodile, which wasn’t detected from Danggu, a place known for its large resident population.

We feel that a dedicated research project should be established to investigate the role of the DNA methods in the Kimberley. If we can be sure it is reliable, then we feel that eDNA sampling will become a very powerful tool, quick, cheap and effective for sampling biodiversity in the Kimberley, allowing ranger teams like Bunuba to efficiently assess the health of their Garuwa places.
EK Fundraising Concert with Kim Churchill

On Friday 21 May, Kim Churchill, Ben Catley, For Sure and Chloe Schofield took to the stage in support of EK and the Kimberley. The sold-out event was a huge success, attended by a young crowd, many of whom had enthusiastic discussions about EK’s work.

Kim shared travel stories and songs in his only performance in Broome and Ben had the community dancing to his uplifting, big-energy sounds. Local musicians, For Sure, brought the spirit of the Kimberley to the stage and newcomer, Chloe, was warmly welcomed.

EK sends a heartfelt thank-you to all the musicians who played on the night and the production team, our wonderful Board members and volunteers who helped make the event such a success.

If you haven’t already, please go to our website and tell the Western Australian Government not to take water from the Fitzroy River: www.environskimberley.org.au/water_paper

Simultaneously, EK hosted an Online Art Auction with additional stunning pieces from Aboriginal artists representing remote Kimberley Country, all included on the professional auction platform.

Money raised from this signature annual event goes towards research to prepare submissions on fracking proposals, raising awareness and supporting the community to hold the government to account on all matters of preservation and protection of this significant region. By participating in the auction, EK’s supporters join us as we go up against companies that have tens of millions of dollars in the bank.

EK sends a giant thank-you to all the artists, collectors and art centres who contributed works. Mick and all the staff at Troppo and the Broome Convention Centre; our wonderful Board members and volunteers; Little Waoenq for the delicious food; Damian Kelly for event photos and all those generous friends of the Kimberley who participated by bidding and buying art. We hope you enjoy your pieces!
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