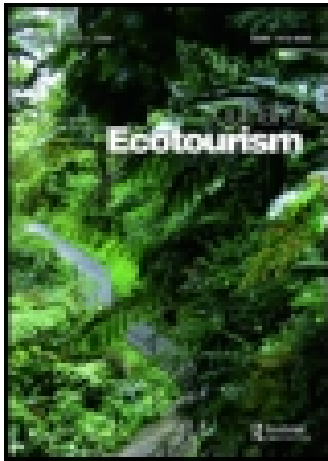


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## **Impacts on Aboriginal spirituality and culture from tourism in the coastal waterways of the Kimberley region, North West Australia**

Amanda J. Smith<sup>a,b,\*</sup>, Pascal Scherrer<sup>c</sup> and Ross Dowling<sup>c</sup>

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The Kimberley coast in Australia's far northwest stretches from Broome, Western Australia, for over 3000 km to the Northern Territory border. The largely undeveloped and remote area has gained increasing popularity in recent years for its spectacular scenery, Aboriginal rock art and native wildlife that forms the platform for a strong and uniquely Australian ecotourism experience. This paper examines the cultural impacts of tourism on the area, with focus on the expedition cruise industry. Visitors to the area access many land-based attractions of significance to Traditional Owners. Unlike at other tourist destinations, non-indigenous cruise operators offer the indigenous experience, without any contact with the Traditional Owners of the areas visited. This project worked in close consultation with representatives from the four native title groups, expedition cruise operators and other stakeholders to assess cultural and environmental management practices and identification of current and potential impacts of ecotourism activities. The study found that the issue of cultural and spiritual impacts on sites of Aboriginal significance, coupled with issues of on-site visitor management, requires urgent attention. Impacts included lack of consultation with Traditional Owners, permission not being sought for access and cultural protocols not being followed resulting in a perceived lack of respect for traditional custodians. There are currently considerable variations in operational practices that should be addressed through the development and implementation of good practice guidelines and operational standards. There is also a need for an improved governance framework and the development of appropriate statutory and non-statutory mechanisms to facilitate sustainability in coastal planning and development of the Kimberley coastal area. The appointment of an adequately equipped body to oversee and drive the regional planning and development process, including the development of a coastal planning strategy, could provide the capacity for such a process.

**Keywords:** expedition cruise ship; Aboriginal spirituality and culture; ecotourism; Traditional Owners; Kimberley; Western Australia

### **Introduction**

The Kimberley region in Australia's far northwest is largely undeveloped because of its remoteness from other economic and population centres of Australia and it is often referred to as Australia's 'last frontier'. The Kimberley coast meanders from Broome, Western

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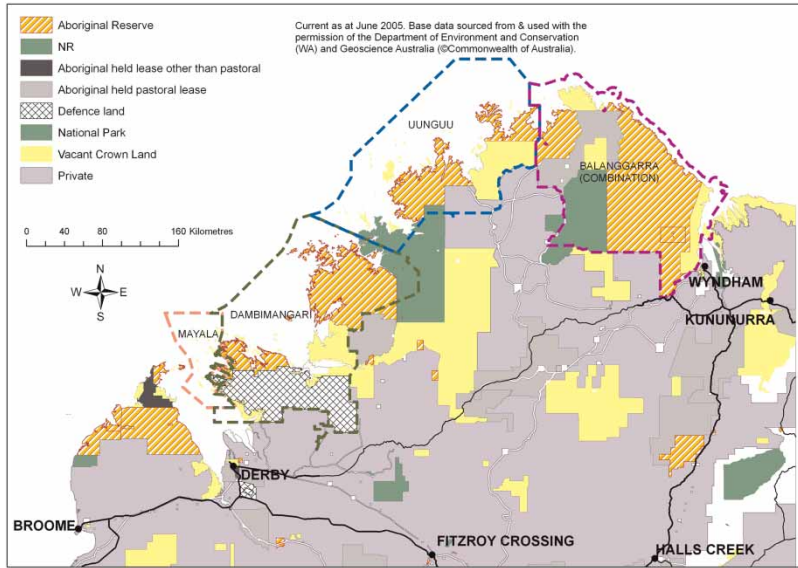


Figure 1. Map of land tenure and the four native title groups across the study area. Note: The continuous line indicates determine native title boundary, dashed line indicates boundary of native title applications.

Australia, for over 3000 km to the Northern Territory border (Figure 1) and its rugged terrain and limited access infrastructure make it mostly inaccessible by land. Much of the region has the status of Aboriginal Reserve and is administered by the Aboriginal Land Trust (ALT), which offers it considerable protective status. The Aboriginal communities in the Kimberley region are diverse and represent 46% of the population in contrast to 2.6% for all of Western Australia (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2006; Sutherland & Pritchard, 2001). The Kimberley offers unique opportunities to experience Aboriginal culture and landscapes (Jacquier, 1999; Tourism WA, 2006b).

In recent years, the area has gained increasing publicity and popularity because of its spectacular scenery, remoteness, Aboriginal rock art and wildlife, all of which collectively form an ideal platform for a strong and uniquely Australian tourism experience. A range of tourism activities has developed throughout the Kimberley, including ecotourism, ground tour and fly-drive operations, four-wheel drive opportunities, luxury coastal cruising, beach-side resorts and indigenous cultural tours (Holmes, 2004). In 2004/2005, the Kimberley region attracted an estimated 285,800 overnight visitors, 86% of whom were domestic visitors (Tourism WA, 2006a). Tourism is currently the third largest sector and is increasing in significance within the region, being regarded as one of the fastest growing industries (Department for Planning & Infrastructure, 2006; Holmes, 2004; Kimberley Development Commission, 2005a, 2005b). Despite the growth of tourism, there is little coordinated management of the increasing numbers of tourists visiting the region, resulting in unregulated tourism pressures, particularly on the coastal areas (Kimberley Development Commission, 2005a).

Expedition cruise tourism is growing rapidly. It offers adventure and luxury cruises along the coast between Broome and Wyndham, accessing on-shore sites along the way and providing a unique experience of the area's natural environment and cultural features. Unlike at other tourist destinations, non-indigenous cruise operators offer the indigenous experience, without any contact with the Traditional Owners of the areas visited.

Nevertheless, many of the sites accessed are important to the Mayala, Dambimangari, Uunguu and Balangarra native title groups.

In 2006, a total of 30 vessels by 28 companies, with a maximum capacity ranging from four to 106 passengers, operated multi-day tours (3–18 days) along the Kimberley coast between Broome and Wyndham. The majority of operations were luxury motor cruise vessels about 25–30 m in length carrying 14–18 passengers. The majority of expedition cruise vessels explore the area north of Cape Leveque to the Mitchell Plateau, with fewer vessels frequenting the area between Mitchell Plateau and Wyndham (Figure 2). Activities revolve around the natural and cultural resources and qualities of the region and with frequent tender excursions and access to shore-based sites. Swimming in freshwater pools, fishing, visitation of Aboriginal art and historical sites and wildlife viewing form a key part of expedition cruise itineraries. Some of these sites are also accessed by free-independent travellers such as from private yachts or recreational visitors from nearby pearling or mining operations. However, there is insufficient data available to measure their activities.

With the growing demand, an increasing number of tourism operations have become established. This has resulted in a largely unregulated, unplanned and unmanaged tourism industry. At the same time, interest from the minerals and petroleum industry in accessing potentially highly lucrative extractable resources of the Kimberley region and off-shore areas has grown, creating additional pressures on the natural resources and culture of the area.

The issues explored in this paper grew out of increasing concerns from government agencies, tourism operators, other stakeholders and the indigenous custodians about the perceived lack of appropriate tourism and environmental management processes in the Kimberley coastal area with key tourism management issues including increasing operator/visitor volumes, perceived lack of economic benefit to the local community, the perceived decline in the quality of the tourism experience, as well as environmental and cultural management issues such as potential or actual site deterioration. The focus of this paper is to identify the

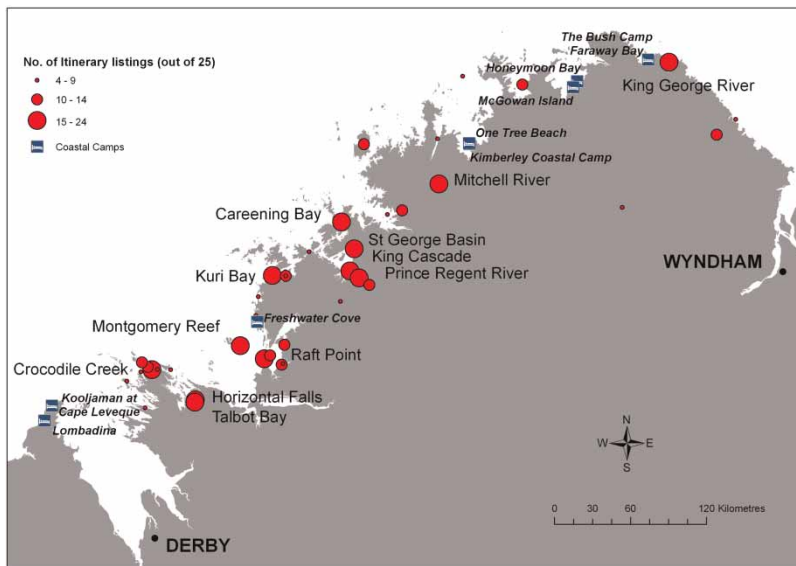


Figure 2. Location of coastal camps and overview of the most often visited sites visited by expedition cruise tours mapped by frequency of listings in 25 vessel itineraries operating along the Kimberley coast during 2006.

impacts from the expedition cruise industry on Aboriginal spirituality and culture in the Kimberley Coastal Waterways and offer potential management strategies.

### **Consultation and visits to country with Traditional Owners**

Information was gathered through discussions with relevant stakeholders and Traditional Owners from the Kimberley region and a review of the relevant literature. While the main ports of access for expedition cruises along the Kimberley coast are Broome and Wyndham, access to on-shore sites is largely limited to areas north of Cape Leveque, including country of the four native title claim groups Mayala, Dambimangari, Uunguu and Balangarra (Figure 1). Traditional Owner input from these native title claim groups and approval for the project was sought through presentation of the project to the Saltwater Country Steering Committee (SCSC) and through discussions with representatives of the Kimberley Land Council (KLC) and the Department of Indigenous Affairs (DIA). The SCSC consists of three community nominated members from each of the native title claimant groups. These representatives have been given permission from their communities and body corporate to undertake preliminary planning regarding coastal and marine matters within their country.

Arrangements were made for field trips with representative Traditional Owners to a selection of priority locations suggested by the SCSC. Selected sites encompassed two (Dambimangari and Uunguu) of the four native title claim groups in the key area of interest due to limitations with cost, time and logistics. Dambimangari and Uunguu native title groups were also selected as most of the visitor pressure occurs on their country. Two Traditional Owners from Dambimangari and three Traditional Owners from Uunguu were nominated by their communities to accompany the researchers on site visits to their country. Researchers met with representatives from the SCSC, those who were to accompany the researchers in the field and other community members on several occasions in various settings, to build a relationship and establish trust. These representatives were considered by the community to be qualified to speak for their country and consisted of at least one senior elder for each native title group. Information was gathered using in-depth field interviews (as per Neuman, 2006) with researchers recording notes of the discussions both during and post-interaction and viewing of video footage taken by KLC of senior elders on return to country trips as part of the Saltwater Country Coastal Project (Kimberley Land Council and Department of Indigenous Affairs, 2006).

During these meetings and site visits, the Traditional Owners discussed their connection to country, their cultural responsibilities, the types and importance of sites and preferences for the management of sites. Photographs of visitor activities at different types of sites were used to prompt discussions on the effects of visitation and tourism activities on the sites and their views on the appropriateness and management of these activities. Upon completion of the research, the results were presented back to the SCSC for further clarification and validation. Observations of visitor behaviour and management of visitors while visiting on-shore sites were made on five different vessels during six trips ranging from 7 to 14 days in duration. Participating operations spanned the full size range of vessels currently operating along the Kimberley coast.

### **Aboriginal spirituality and culture in the Kimberley region, Western Australia**

Initial settlement of Australia is estimated to have occurred between 40,000 and 65,000 years ago (Morwood, 2002; O'Connor, 1999; Walsh, 2000). Occupation of the Kimberley

region in Australia's far northwest began at least 30,000 years ago and probably earlier, according to archaeological excavation studies by O'Connor (1999) and evidence of rock art which was dated to about 40,000 years before present (Fankhouser, O'Connor, & Pitelkowitz, 1997). The extensive period of Aboriginal occupation of the Kimberley region is also reflected in one of the world's longest and most complex rock art sequences, with distinct chronological differences in painting types, subjects and styles (Walsh, 2000). These complex rock art sequences and the knowledge of such long occupation part of the Kimberley's appeal to tourists.

Aboriginal people along the Kimberley coast live under a highly organised and complex social structure which is also reflected in the diversity of cultural and language groups (Department of Indigenous Affairs, 2004; O'Connor, 1999). Their close connection to country includes the dimensions of people, Dreamings, areas of land, water and sea, living and non-living things, the subsurface, underground and the sky (Barber & Rumley, 2003; Kimberley Land Council, 2005). The law assigned to Aboriginal peoples in the Dreamtime forms the basis and guiding principles for their society and interaction with nature and assigns rights and responsibilities to be upheld (Kimberley Land Council, 2005; Wunambal Gaambera Aboriginal Corporation, 2001).

Today, despite the inherent social problems associated with disengagement and geographic displacement, the Aboriginal people of the Kimberley continue to define their communities through the practice of law and culture and remain strongly attached to their identity, with emphasis on independence, tradition and self-determination (Kimberley Land Council, 2005). Traditional Owners are more than community stakeholders; they have distinct, inherent rights and obligations to country. The concept of country does not allow for a separation of people, land and waters. In an indigenous vision of country, economy, spirituality, knowledge and kin are all related and interconnected (Kinnane, 2002). Country is not seen as being 'owned' as in the Western tradition, rather it is held in a reflexive, obligatory way. Traditional Owners are bound to country and have special rights to country and these rights come with special responsibilities. These relational understandings of country are maintained through systems of skin, language, land use and spirituality (Kinnane, 2002).

Country is who we are. We are part of it and it is part of us. You look after country and it looks after you. (Dambimangari Traditional Owner)

There is a strong interest by Aboriginal people of the Kimberley area in the maintenance of their cultural sites. Many of these sites form a key component of the Kimberley coast tourism product. Both private vessels and expedition cruise vessels regularly visit sites of Aboriginal significance, including rock art and burial sites, and many commercial operators use the Aboriginal aspect in their marketing. The main concerns raised by the Traditional Owners in regard to tourism activities along the coast relates to uncontrolled access, the amount of visitors, lack of consultation with Traditional Owners, their not being asked permission for access, not being advised of where visitors are going and what they are doing, lack of respect, tourism activities causing damage to country and the disturbance of sites of Aboriginal importance, visitors going to places they should not be and visitors not following cultural protocols (Dehoog, 2000; Horstman & Wightman, 2001; Kimberley Land Council, 2004a, 2004b; Scherrer, Smith, & Dowling, 2008; Wunambal Gaambera Aboriginal Corporation, 2001).

### Impacts on Aboriginal spirituality and culture

To date, there appears to be relatively little published socio-cultural research relating to cruise ship tourism, particularly in regard to indigenous communities and impacts on Aboriginal spirituality and culture. Impacts identified in the broader literature relevant to the Kimberley included congestion created by an influx of tourists into small communities, displacement of locals by infrastructure needs, lack of indigenous control of the industry, benefits or otherwise of tourism to indigenous communities, economic opportunities of tourism to indigenous communities, assimilation of western attitudes about money, conflict between users' recreational experiences and tourist experiences, including displacement of traditional recreational activities, amenity declines and decreased respect for traditional leaders (Brown, 1999; Fuller, Bultjens, & Cummings, 2005; Gorecki & Wallace, 2003; Jaakson, 2004; Klein, 2003; Lester & Weeden, 2004; Ryan & Crotts, 1997; Snow, 1998; Stewart, Draper, & Johnson, 2005; Yu & Yu, 2003). Snow (1998) concluded that with careful planning to ensure that the benefits are maximised and costs are reduced, tourism can provide opportunities for communities who are in need of economic self-determination.

In relation to the expedition cruise ship industry, art, ceremonial and burial sites are the focus of some on-shore visits in the north Kimberley with some sites being frequently visited by numerous tour operators and private visitors. There are also sites visited that are not obviously connected with Aboriginal interpretation or where there is a physical presence. These sites include areas considered by tourism as being of high scenic value or where, for example, freshwater pools and waterfalls are found. Traditional Owners also feel a responsibility for non-Aboriginal objects that occur on country. For example, Unguu people stated that they feel a sense of responsibility for historical items such as the DC3 plane wreck at Vansittart Bay from the 1940s because it is on their country and is also part of their history. Unlike in other tourist destinations, the indigenous experience is purely based on the visitor experience of rock art and other sites and the interpretation offered by operators, without any contact with the Traditional Owners of the areas visited. Traditional Owners welcome visitors to country and are not opposed to tourism *per se*; however, they state that visitors must do so, without breaking Aboriginal law and by showing respect for country.

Don't want to stop people coming here but we need to work together to protect country. (Dam-bimangari Traditional Owner)

The impact from tourism on Aboriginal spirituality and culture can be broadly divided into two categories as listed below:

- access, health and care of country, e.g. management and spirituality, visiting country;
- physical and environmental damage/change, e.g. rubbish, signs, trail markers, burial sites, rock art, vandalism, fire, trails and weeds.

#### Access, health and care of country

The largest stress felt by Traditional Owners was that they did not know what was happening on country and that approval is not sought to access country (Horstman & Wightman, 2001; Scherrer et al., 2008; Wunambal Gaambera Aboriginal Corporation, 2001). Traditional Owners feel that tourism needs to ask 'Can I?'. Traditional Owners expressed concern at the uncontrolled access to sites, which they believe could result in serious accidents and injury, illness or death to custodians of the area or to visitors as a result of disturbances.

Accidents come back to Aboriginal people. (Unguu Traditional Owner)



... it is Aboriginal people from that country who get punished [if someone gets hurt]. (Unguu Traditional Owner)

If anyone gets killed, who you going to blame. (Balanggarra Traditional Owner)

Too much people and tourists coming around, messing around with things; never ask us what they can do; they never tell us what they want to do; pouring like water; white tourists everywhere on our country (Kimberley Land Council, 2004b, p. 12)

Concerns about accidents or injury on country come from the sense of responsibility that Traditional Owners feel for country. Custodians experience spiritual and physical consequences for damage to country and injury/death of visitors to their country. For example, visitors are known to climb to the top of the falls on the King George River and swim in the freshwater pools. Balanggarra people stated that visitors to the falls may look at the falls from the water below but that they must not climb or swim in the waters at the top of the falls. The top of the falls is a Wunggud<sup>1</sup> place. They believe that if people climb to the top they will disturb the spirit snake causing it to go away resulting in the water drying up.

Don't you go [visitors] there on top again [King George Falls]. (Balanggarra Traditional Owner)

All regions of country are regarded as needing human obligatory ownership to be maintained through spiritual and cultural practices (Kinnane, 2002). When someone is injured or when damage is caused to country from an outsider it is considered that country has not been cared for properly and as a result it is believed that the spirits will punish Traditional Owners for not taking proper care of their country.

If Aboriginal people don't know a place they don't go exploring ... they stay where they know. There are consequences if you go somewhere you shouldn't be. Kartiya [non-Aboriginal people] go everywhere. (Dambimangari Traditional Owner)

It was explained that when non-indigenous persons visit Aboriginal country without permission it causes stress on individuals. Equilibrium must be maintained between visitors and Traditional Owners visiting country. Visitors throw the equilibrium out of balance and this must be rectified by Traditional Owners returning to country. Kinnane (2002) stated that access to country is essential to allow for the teaching of knowledge and disciplines that are required to raise children, share culture, ensure the future management of a resource and to fulfil religious and social obligations.

We want people to go to the right places. People have to follow the rules [cultural rules]. (Balanggarra Traditional Owner)

We introduce ourselves to country ... respecting the country. We don't visit these places all the time. (It was stated that it is a problem that kartiya [non-Aboriginal people] visit all the time.) It's a mockery ... there is no respect. (Dambimangari Traditional Owner)

Traditional Owners expressed a strong desire for visitors to obtain permits to access country so that there is a better understanding of where people are going. Permits are required for visitors to visit or travel through ALT reserves. The permitting system has been put in place to protect the privacy of Aboriginal communities, preserve Aboriginal culture, protect the natural environment and encourage visitor safety. To date, no permits

for access to any ALT reserves have been granted to expedition cruise operators. Thus, land-based excursions at many sites currently accessed by expedition cruise operators and recreational users constitute trespassing.

The tourist industry currently has free access to country. This is a totally skewed view of the importance and value of Aboriginal country and ownership. If BHP or the Defence Department owned the land, nobody would go there without permission. (DIA representative)

Additionally, Traditional Owners want to be involved in the planning and decision-making process for the lands and see themselves as information providers.

### **Physical and environmental damage to country**

Care of country is compromised when a third party causes any form of damage to country. Further, this damage is also considered to be disrespectful to Aboriginal people as it breaches and disregards cultural protocols. Current environmental impacts of expedition cruise activities were small. Of the 20 trails monitored in this study, 10 of the trails had a distinguishable trail tread which could be described in empirical terms, while the remaining 10 occurred on a tidal beach environment, or over hard or rocky substrates that could not be described as having any vulnerability to measurable erosion resulting from human impact. However, the potential for impact is high, particularly on islands and reefs, and as a result of the lack of knowledge about the biodiversity of the area, potential of introduced grasses, altered fire regimes and the unplanned nature of the trails. In addition, trails and any form of development are unacceptable to Traditional Owners and detract from the wilderness experience sought by visitors. Traditional Owners commented that they did not want to see lots of trails, 'one trail is okay'. Dambimangari people stated that they '... don't like trails because it encourages people to explore'. They queried how people knew which sites to visit and where to go, 'people are curious. . . . like cats'.

Traditional Owners also considered development such as signs and trail markers as inappropriate without proper approval. Formal signs and trail markers are only present at a few sites. These signs are in place on land managed by the Western Australian Department of Environment and Conservation. There is contention about whether appropriate consultation was undertaken for approval and placement of these signs.

We Aboriginal people don't go round putting signs in other people's place but as for kartiya (non-Aboriginal people) they do that . . . and when we go there we think maybe we aren't welcome, we don't like it . . . (Dambimangari Traditional Owner)

Informal trail markers such as rock cairns were also commented on by Traditional Owners. When encountered, Traditional Owners dismantled rock cairns (Figure 3a and b). Traditional Owners do not consider rock cairns appropriate.

leave things as they are . . . don't go building things and putting up signs. (Dambimangari Traditional Owner)

tourists mark trails . . . we don't want trails to be marked. (Balangarra Traditional Owner)

Rubbish was also of concern as Traditional Owners saw it as disrespecting country. While only a minimal amount of rubbish was found during the site assessment of this study, when rubbish was encountered during an on-shore visit with Dambimangari people their disgust and anger was expressed using expletives. They said that litter

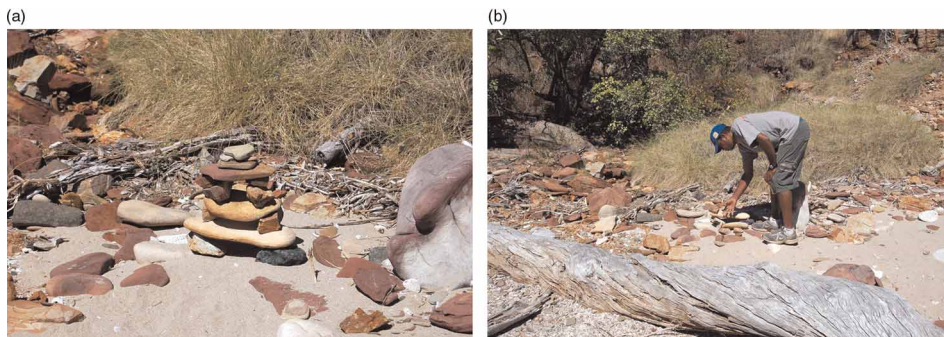


Figure 3. (a) Rock cairn at Raft Point; (b) Traditional Owner dismantling rock cairn.

concerned and upset them. A Balangarra person described their concern over the presence of toilet paper and faeces found on the beach at Pangali Cove and the consequences of littering:

We don't put food or rubbish or even dirty fingers into the water otherwise the sea would get angry and rough. (Balangarra Traditional Owner)

Observation of expedition cruise visitors showed that only a small amount of litter, e.g. plastic wrap, aluminium foil and aluminium cans, were encountered on shore and it was typical that operators would collect the rubbish. No visitors on expedition cruise tours were observed littering suggesting that perhaps it is visitors from private vessels that are leaving rubbish behind. Additionally, it was common practice for operators to advise visitors to not leave any form of rubbish behind.

Traditional Owners also commented that they do not like people burning rubbish on shore, a practice undertaken by some operators. This concern was expressed not only because of unburnt rubbish being left behind but also because of the threat of bush fires starting in the 'wrong places'.

Tourism activities causing damage to country and the disturbance of sites of Aboriginal importance is of major concern. Art, ceremonial and burial sites are the focus of some on-shore visits and it has been reported that visitors frequently visit, disturb and camp on art, ceremonial and burial sites with no appreciation of their importance and have been held responsible for the movement and removal of parts of skeletons placed in burial sites (Horstman & Wightman, 2001; Wunambal Gaambera Aboriginal Corporation, 2001). Visitors or some tour operators may not readily understand the significance of disturbing these sites.

Aboriginal rock art sites are of particular interest to tourism operators. These rock art sites have particular significance to the Aboriginal people. Two of the most often cited art types are the Wandjina art and the Gwion Gwion<sup>2</sup> art (also referred to as Bradshaw figures) (Figure 4a and b). Wandjina figures are large figures found inland, on the coast and on some islands such as Bigge Island (Blundell & Woolagoodja, 2005). Wandjinas are supernatural beings that have been around since the beginning of time (the Dreaming) and continue to play an active role in Aboriginal people's lives today. The Wandjina are specific to the people of a particular region and are regarded as some of the most important manifestations of the life-force known as Wungurr (Blundell & Woolagoodja, 2005). The Gwion Gwion paintings are also popular tourist attractions and have been dated by Roberts et al. (1997) at more than 17,000 years old. These paintings of human-like figures are found throughout the Kimberley and are of significance to the local Aboriginal communities

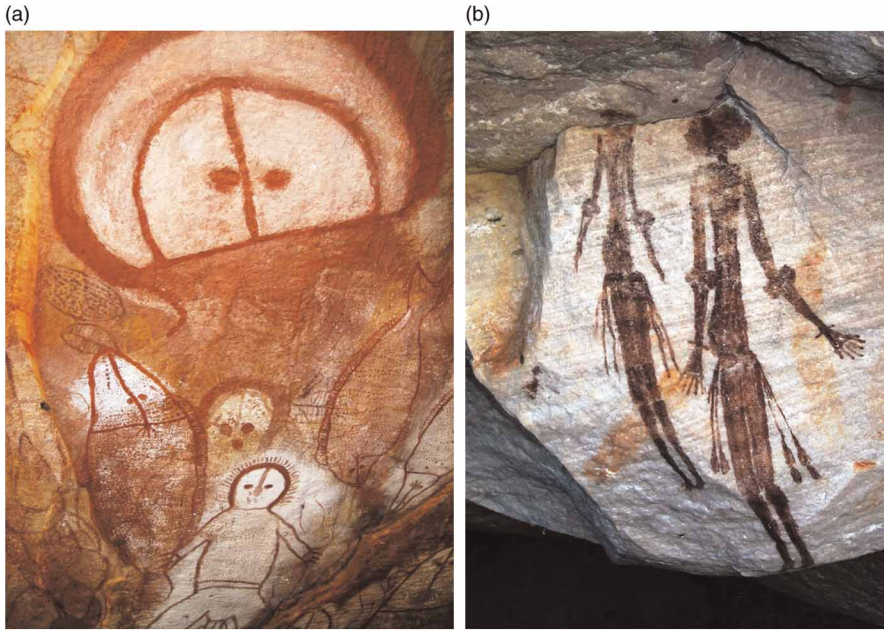


Figure 4. Examples of (a) Wandjina style; (b) Gwion Gwion (Bradshaw) style rock art along the Kimberley coast.

(Wilson, 2006). Conflicts may occur between the local Aboriginal community, operators and visitors due to the lack of understanding of the significance of these sites.

Disturbance of art sites was present at Raft Point (Dambimangari country) and Bigge Island (Unguu country), where Traditional Owners pointed out numerous areas where charcoal had been used on the rock face (Figure 5a and b). This was either as drawings over Aboriginal art or outlining Aboriginal art. Traditional Owners said that Aboriginal people do not use charcoal and would not use it in the caves. There were charcoal drawings in the caves that Traditional Owners said were definitely not drawn by Aboriginal people (Figure 5a and b). In both situations, there were small pieces of charcoal on the ground below the rock art. When charcoal markings were observed, Traditional Owners expressed anger and upset. They said it made them sad.

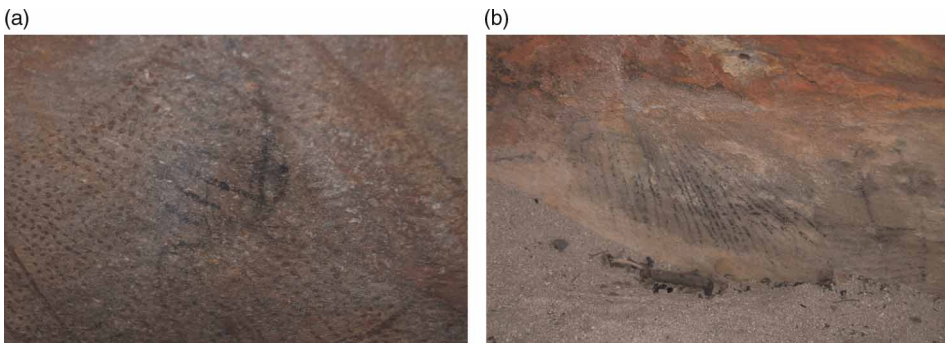


Figure 5. (a) Charcoal markings on rock art at Raft Point; (b) charcoal markings on rock art at Bigge Island.

People been mucking with charcoal on paintings. Makes me want to cry seeing all those things . . . charcoal on drawings. We can't go into their house and scribble on walls. (Dambimangari Traditional Owners)

These things [charcoal] don't belong there. It hurts our lian [spiritual heart] and makes us sad. (Dambimangari Traditional Owners)

There was also evidence at an art site in Vansittart Bay where non-Aboriginal people had painted on rock art with house paints. Uunguu people said that this 'hurt their feelings'. Other issues concerning rock art sites were wear caused to the rock face through people continually visiting the sites.

There were no observations of visitors from expedition cruise vessels in this study vandalising rock art sites. Groups are generally kept together at rock art sites and were usually asked to not touch rock art and to take care when visiting rock art sites to avoid brushing up against walls. Some operators asked visitors to remove hats or backpacks and in some situations only the guide would go near the rock art where features of the rock art would be described. In some situations, however, it was observed that these briefings were insufficient as visitors were observed by the researchers brushing against walls to support themselves and were also seen touching paintings. It is not likely that visitors on expedition cruise tours would have the time available or the opportunity to deface the rock art. There is no definite knowledge of who is responsible for the vandalism.

An issue of major concern for Traditional Owners was visitors going to, photographing and disturbing burial sites. The disturbance of burial sites was one of the most frequently commented on issues highlighting its importance and significance. Traditional Owners have repeatedly requested that visitors do not go to burial places through fear of them disturbing the remains.

Shouldn't take things away . . . or fiddle around with painting . . . burial sites. (Uunguu Traditional Owner)

[Burial sites] no go zone . . . full stop. All of them [visitors] shouldn't go there without our consent. We don't want people mucking with things. (Dambimangari Traditional Owner).

Tourists shouldn't be looking around. They mustn't muck around with things. (Balanggarra Traditional Owner)

They [non-Aboriginal people] don't go visiting cemeteries all the time, maybe once or twice, when they or someone is being buried or when they want to pay their respects . . . they don't go and move things around [in reference to differences between non-Aboriginal burial places and the disrespect shown for Aboriginal burial places]. (Dambimangari Traditional Owner)

Makes us frightened, angry, scared [bones being disturbed]. We'll be the ones punished, not them. It might bring a big cyclone. (Uunguu Traditional Owner)

It was considered that people visiting and photographing burial sites and remains is disrespectful.

Aboriginal people respect the dead. We have a lot of feelings for the dead. We don't say their name [the deceased]. After a funeral we have a big smoke so the spirit rests . . . so they don't come back. Don't go back and take a picture. Kartiya makes fun of it going to the same place . . . same place, making roads [trails] . . . no respect. (Dambimangari Traditional Owner)

There was also concern of the spirits attaching themselves to people 'it can drive people mad if a spirit attaches itself'. Proper protocols and respect are necessary to

visit burial sites. A Dambimangari Traditional Owner commented that in the past it was not necessary to go back to burial sites to check remains; however, now they go back because non-Aboriginal people are disturbing sites.

We didn't have to go back, but now, we have to . . . I feel frightened going back. (Dambimangari Traditional Owner)

It was explained by a Dambimangari Traditional Owner that when people died they would be laid up high on either a wooden or rock platform. The body would be covered with stones. After 2–3 years, when there were just bones left, the bones would be taken down to the mother where she would cry once more. The bones would then be painted in ochre and wrapped in paperbark, tied with a woman's hair that was twisted into twine or with rope made from bark and then the bones would be placed up high in a rock ledge and covered again with stones. A Wandjina with arms up in the air would be painted to represent a burial site (Figure 6). Many of the popular rock art sites visited by the expedition cruise industry, such as Raft Point, have these Wandjina figures present.

It has been observed by Traditional Owners that the stones have been disturbed to make rock cairns. This is most likely through ignorance and lack of awareness of the presence of a burial site. At Wiyangarri (a child's interim burial site), Uunguu custodians observed that rocks had been removed from a burial site and the initials 'PR 1989 & KR 1989' had been written by re-arranging the rocks. The Uunguu Traditional Owners placed the rocks back on the burial site. Comments from the Uunguu Traditional Owners included:

No respect for this country . . . no respect

Makes me really sad to see things like this

Expedition cruise operators observed in this study were generally shown to respect burial sites by asking people to not go near areas where remains are located. However, at times, this information was not clearly defined, more-so with just a simple outstretched

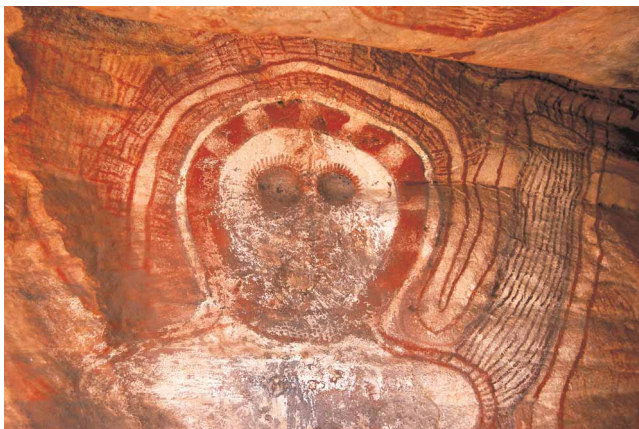


Figure 6. Wandjina with arms outstretched above the head marking the presence of a burial site.

arm cautioning to ‘not go over there’ and visitors were observed by the researchers to walk in the general vicinity. At Bigge Island, skeletal remains are located very closely to the most frequently visited rock art site. The remains are in clear view and while visitors were discouraged from taking photos, some passengers were observed by researchers to take photographs. Of further concern is exactly which areas visitors should be allowed to access. At Raft Point, one operator did not take visitors into an area because it was a burial site. Another operator, however, allowed visitors into the same site because the bones were no longer present. The inconsistency between operators thus is a key concern.

### **Planning and management recommendations for cruise ship tourism in the Kimberley region**

A range of factors has contributed to the ‘*ad hoc*’ development of the expedition cruise industry in the Kimberley. These include the remoteness and size of the Kimberley coast, the cost and time to access the area, limited authority (geographically and/or in terms of responsibility) by land and water management agencies and lack of resources and coordination between government agencies. The key issue raised repeatedly by the Traditional Owners from the four native title claimant groups during this project, as well as apparent from previous reports and documents, is the issue of acknowledgement of ownership and lack of respect for the Traditional Owners. Traditional Owners are the custodians of the country on which most of the expedition cruise activities occur and as such have cultural and spiritual responsibilities and rights to these areas and the activities within. These rights are reflected in the areas’ declaration as Aboriginal reserves. The Traditional Owners of the Kimberley coast during this project repeatedly expressed the need for respect by other parties through the acknowledgement of ownership, consultation and the seeking of permission for any activities involving Aboriginal lands. Although there have been some negotiations with Traditional Owners by individual parties, many of the activities (including the establishment of dwellings by squatters) on coastal Aboriginal lands in the Kimberley appear to be occurring without appropriate agreements, consultation or permission. Further concerns were raised about the environmental, cultural and spiritual impacts on sites accessed without Traditional Owner consultation and approvals. The notion of balancing country, where Traditional Owners visit their country to maintain sites of significance and to rectify the spiritual imbalance imposed on country through access by non-indigenous visitors, was an important factor behind the expressed desire of Traditional Owners to return to country.

There is a need for the development of a tourism management plan to ensure environmentally and socially sustainable tourism which is consistent with the natural and cultural values of the Kimberley coast and which provides appropriate managed access to the area for members of the local community. This would include the development of a zoning system based on cultural and environmental values and sensitivities in collaboration with Traditional Owners according to appropriate activities and access; exploration of a user pays system to help recover some of the cost of managing the area; the development of management plans for sites for which access has been agreed to and which are regularly visited; development of guidelines and training, where culturally appropriate, for operators and visitors in regard to respecting country and understanding Aboriginal culture and land that includes appropriate interpretation of sites.

A tourism plan for the region needs to be supported by a more coordinated expedition cruise industry. There is a need to develop and implement standards and good practice

guidelines regarding tourism activities along the Kimberley coast, coupled with enforceable control measures and rewards for good practice. Good practice guidelines would include minimum safety standards appropriate to activities in the Kimberley, visitor management guidelines, a strengthened accreditation system and appropriate control measures and issue of permits to access ALT lands. Award of such permits may be based on capacity for good practice with longer term permits awarded for operators who demonstrate high standards of operation, including supporting local and indigenous communities. These guidelines would also need to include means to document and report details on sites visited and visitor numbers at individual sites. Further, a formal arrangement such as a memorandum of understanding and/or code of conduct between Traditional Owners and expedition cruise operators, mining companies and pearling companies would need to be established.

As discussed previously, planning and management of activities affecting the Kimberley coast are currently not occurring in a coordinated or holistic way. Presently, much of the activities occur in State waters where there are very limited controls in respect to cultural and environmental activities with a majority of the land being Aboriginal reserves managed by the ALT. The establishment of appropriate governance mechanisms would be essential to achieve any of the proposed management actions. Currently State government agencies, which have some management presence in the area, have limited control/authority and limited resources. In order to create a sustainable tourism industry there is a need to appoint a body to oversee and drive the regional planning and development process, including the development of the tourism management plan mentioned above, development of a coastal planning strategy to prevent or minimise development that would negatively affect the pristine character of the coastline and ensuring adequate representation and consultation with the indigenous custodians and other stakeholders.

Such management measures have been utilised in other destinations visited by the cruise industry in order to reduce environmental impact, for example: Arctic (AECO, n.d.; Stewart et al., 2005); Alaska (Alaska Department of Environmental Conservation, 2002); the Great Barrier Reef (GBRMPA, 2005) and Antarctic (Hofman & Jatko, 2000; IAATO, 2008a, 2008b; Landau & Spletstoesser, 2007). Cultural impacts were, however, not as apparent at these sites.

## Conclusion

The Traditional Owner groups that this project engaged with are not opposed to tourism *per se*. Indeed, tourism is seen as a potential way to facilitate return visits to country through generating some income and arrangements of mutual benefit. Today, nevertheless, appropriate mechanisms to ensure such benefits are not yet in place. The key steps towards sustainable development along the Kimberley coast revolve around a structure agreed upon by all parties for engagement between the Traditional Owners, industry stakeholders, the community and government. The role of the Traditional Owners in this process cannot be overemphasised in order to ensure that their custodianship is appropriately acknowledged and respected. Furthermore, the other stakeholders including industry, community and government need to have a high level of participation in this process to ensure that appropriate implementation, monitoring and funding of agreed measures eventuate. Once a framework for engagement and decision making has been agreed upon, a detailed tourism plan for the region, supported by good practice guidelines, operational standards and control measures should be developed.



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## Notes

1. Also referred to as Wunggu, Wungurr. Rock python who appears during Lalai (Dreaming) as both the rainbow and the rainbow serpent. Wungurr are creator snakes, who broke rocks and made tracks for water and now live in deep pools (Blundell & Woolagoodja, 2005; Mowaljarlai & Malnic, 1993; Wunambal Gaambera Aboriginal Corporation, 2001).
2. Variant spellings are: Gwion Gwion, Guyan Guyan or Guyon Guyon.

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