

The Kimberley Coast – Saltwater Country – a Traditional Owner’s perspective

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The Traditional Owners of the coast of the Kimberley region, known as Saltwater Country, comprised today of the Bardi Jawi, Malaya, Wanjina Wunggurr Dambimangari, Wanjina Wunggurr Uuguu, and Balangarra peoples, have a long history of association with the landscape, seascape, flora and fauna of this region. Their history stretches back at least 30,000 years (O’Connor 1999), during the last Ice Age, and before the time of the marine flooding of the Kimberley region. Since the time of the marine flooding, perhaps some 7000 years ago, when the present Kimberley coast was formed, they have had a close association with the coastal landscape, the islands, the seascape, the coastal flora and fauna, and the marine life. Archaeological research shows the long term association of Saltwater people and the coastal environment (Veitch 1999) since the marine flooding.

In this setting of Saltwater Country, the Wanjina Wunggurr Saltwater people share a commonality of environment, law, and culture, and like other Australian Aboriginal people their belief system is connected with the Wunggurr rainbow serpent and other creation beings. Commonly termed “The Dreaming”, it is considered to be the longest continuing belief system in the world, and the Traditional Owners of Saltwater Country strongly identify with “Wanjina”, anthropomorphic creation beings, in their law and culture.

Aboriginal Saltwater people live their lives in coastal and marine environments, as distinct from Freshwater people who live on rivers and inland country. They see the coast and seascape as part of their traditional lives – and they are the custodians or caretakers of this environment. Their involvement and attachment to the land is multiple: it is their home, their physical place, their own personal spiritual place, an area that provides food and water, shelter, and a place that has tribal spiritual connotations and history. For the Traditional Owners along the Kimberley coast there are majestic sea cliffs, mineral-stained sea cliffs, islands, mud flats, tide movements, areas of freshwater seepage, rainforests and vine thickets, reefs, mangroves and, in the realm of coastal life, fish, mud crabs, turtles, dugongs, stingrays,

sea birds, amongst many others. They see the country as unspoiled, and as they look after what they call “our country”, they feel that the country looks after them – it is a two-way spiritual connection.

Their association with the land is that they are part of the land. They carry a traditional knowledge and familiarity about the land, coast and seascape, passed down through the generations, and gained from personal experiences, that is different to that of the Western Scientist, and that has long served them as a People to be able to survive in their environment. Their knowledge of the migration and arrival and breeding seasons of various coastal and marine animals, for instance, though different to that of hard-data science and may be anecdotal to Western Scientist but is based on long-term observations of patterns, and enables them to be at the right place and right time to hunt or harvest specific species. Their knowledge of water occurrence and movement enables them to be at the right time and right place to harvest life-sustaining water. It may not be 20th Century Scientific technique but it is information about patterns of land, water and life that enabled and enables them to survive in Saltwater Country.

The Traditional Owners actively live/lived on the coastal lands and islands, harvesting shell fish, oysters, and shipworm, hunting turtles and dugongs, and catching fish and stingrays, obtaining freshwater, and sheltering in caves and rock overhangs. In from the coast, they hunted kangaroo, snakes, lizards, and other animals, harvested plant life in terms of fruit and roots, and other “bush tucker”. Originally they harvested and hunted using traditional means, but in recent times have employed the use of technology. They also utilized certain plants for boat-making (“kalwa”), charcoal-making (for ochres), and stunning fishing.

On a final note, I hope have transmitted here that the Traditional Owners of Saltwater Country have a respect for the land, a belief that the land looks after its inhabitants if they look after it, and that the Traditional Owners have a core natural history knowledge of the landscape, water and ecology of the coastal Kimberley that has served them well for thousands of years.

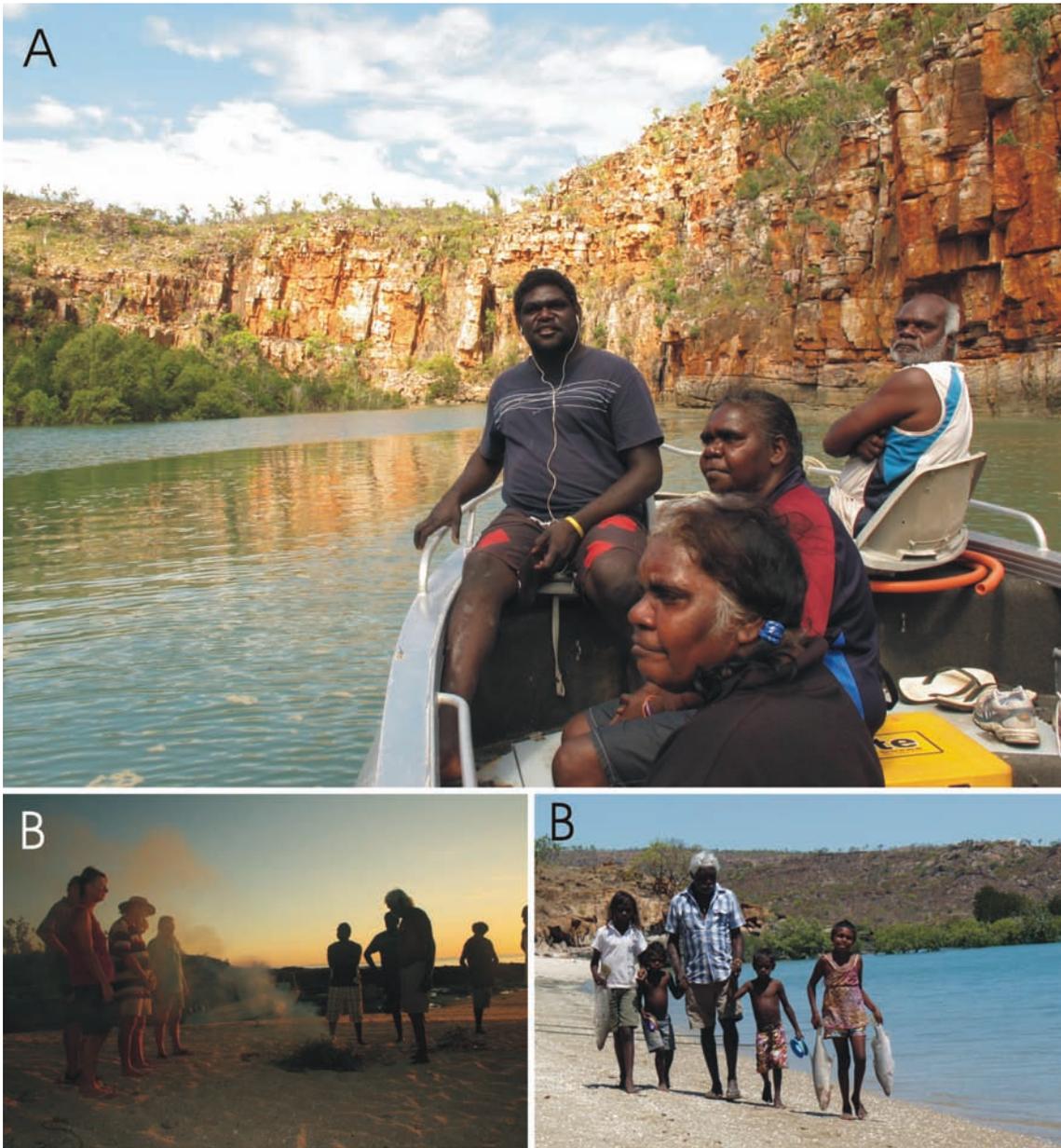


Figure 1. A. A spiritual place where stories are told to pass on information to others and to the next generation. In this place, there is “river” rock”, which tells a story of the flood that transported rock to the (now) offshore islands. It tells a story about the river floods that took place before the marine flooding of the landscape that created the present coast. It is also a spiritual place because of “Wanjina”, the Father of the Country. “Wanjina” tells the Traditional Owners where to live, how to live, what to eat, where is the freshwater, what are the rules (the Law). B. When visitors or strangers arrive to a place to share a story or knowledge about the coastal lands, or to be introduced to the values and beliefs of the Saltwater Country Traditional Owners, there is first need for a cleansing to prepare them to come to Saltwater Country. In this photograph, some visitors on the left are being traditionally cleansed by smoke from the leaves of a special plant burnt for this purpose by the Traditional Owners on the right. C. Yaloon, a special place, where training and teaching takes place. Here, a catch of barramundi is being ferried home for cooking.