



Department of Conservation
and Land Management

CALM BRIEFING PAPER 3/87

RUDALL RIVER NATIONAL PARK

Introduction

Recently there have been numerous reports in the media highlighting the concerns of both Aboriginal Communities and environmentalists about mineral exploration and, in particular, the possible mining of uranium in Rudall River National Park. This paper aims to set down the facts as they have occurred so that you can give accurate and informed responses to enquiries.

National Park History and Values

In 1974 the Conservation Through Reserves Committee (CTRC, greenbook) recommended that an area in the Great and Little Sandy Deserts, incorporating the Rudall River, be declared an "A" Class Reserve for "Conservation of Flora and Fauna". After reviewing the CTRC proposals, the EPA in its recommendations to Government (red book) endorsed the classification of the area defined by the CTRC but proposed that the reserve be a national park. The national park was proclaimed in April 1977.

Rudall River, with an area of about 1,569,459ha, is Australia's second largest national park. (Recent changes made Kakadu National Park the largest.) It contains sandplains and dunes of both the Great and Little Sandy Deserts (which are distinguished by their geological origins), salt lakes of the Percival paleo-river system and ranges of hills, which form the catchment of Rudall River, as well as the river itself. It is a valuable component of our conservation reserve system because, with its diversity of landforms and their associated flora and fauna, it is representative of many different desert environmental ecosystems.

There are few visitors to the park. Most come from adjacent mining communities, but there is a rapidly increasing interest in using 4WD vehicles to explore the most remote areas.

There are no CALM staff in the park.

Aboriginal History and Value

People of the Western Deserts have lived in the area for many thousands of years. Although they encountered early European explorers, unlike their neighbours in the Pilbara and Kimberley, they were largely unaffected by European alienation of the land for pastoral or other purposes. Until quite recent times they continued to live by their traditions and laws. Some people never really left the area and they continued to maintain strong ties with the country. Many people living today were born and raised in these deserts.

During the 1980s Aboriginal people have established several communities in the deserts. Two of these are within the national park at Punmu on Lake Dora and at Pangurr near Mt Cotten.

From the land management point of view there are many advantages to the people returning to their lands. It is now recognised that many of the environmental problems of the arid zone (such as the decline of many animal species) are closely correlated with movement of Aboriginal people from the land and consequent cessation of traditional activities, particularly burning. These activities are being renewed.

There are also many advantages to the Aboriginal people who return to their traditional country and ways of life.

Mining History and Values

Indications that there is mineral potential in the area date back several decades. Prior to the proclamation of the national park, several companies had explored extensively. The mineral potential and the existence of several mining tenements prompted the national park to be gazetted "open for mining" under Section 275 of the 1904 Mining Act (now replaced by the Mining Act 1978) in November 1977.

Since then mineral exploration has proceeded with conditions attached to exploration permits. Potential mineral deposits include uranium, gold, platinum and base metals.

At present CRA Exploration Pty Ltd is the most active company operating in the park. The company has a base camp just outside the northern boundary of the park, adjacent to a uranium deposit at Kintyre which is just inside the national park.

While much of the company's present work is associated with defining and evaluating the deposit, it is also active in drilling sites identified by magnetic anomaly techniques throughout the central area of the park.

Current Issues

- 1 Aboriginal Communities residing within a national park present a new challenge to park management in this State. The Department is seeking a mutually acceptable formula which would allow living area leases for the two communities, appropriate use of the park by those people and meaningful Aboriginal involvement in management.
 - 2 Aboriginal people are concerned about the actions of mining companies in respect of both privacy and sites of cultural importance. Although major responsibility for the resolution of these questions lies with the companies, the communities and the WA Museum, which is responsible for administration of the Aboriginal Heritage Act, CALM has the responsibility for land use and planning, and wishes to see a sensible and workable outcome.
 - 3 While the Minister does not have jurisdiction to prevent exploration on existing tenements, the Department wishes to minimise impact and ensure adequate rehabilitation. (Through recent amendments to the Mining Act, new tenements will require prior consent of the Minister for CALM.) This is achieved by conditions attached to Exploration Permits and by close liaison and field inspections.
 - 4 Management planning is a positive means by which many of the problems can be addressed. Because CALM does not have sufficient resources, the Government has accepted an offer to provide \$50,000 to enable CALM to prepare a management plan. CALM has also offered \$30,000 from Aboriginal Community Development Program funds to Aboriginal Communities to enable them to employ a consultant to develop solutions to the issues described in point 1 above. The solutions would become an integral part of the management plan.
 - 5 Uranium mining is not allowed under current Government policy, but the company is entitled to continue exploration for all target minerals.
 - 6 The Government has established a Coordination Committee to examine issues of concern (see 2 above). It includes senior representatives of Aboriginal Affairs Planning Authority (chair), Mines, CALM and the WA Museum (Aboriginal Sites Department), and the Western Desert Land Council. CALM is represented by Chris Haynes and Jim Sharp.
- Further enquiries to either Chris Haynes, Jim Sharp or Tony Start.