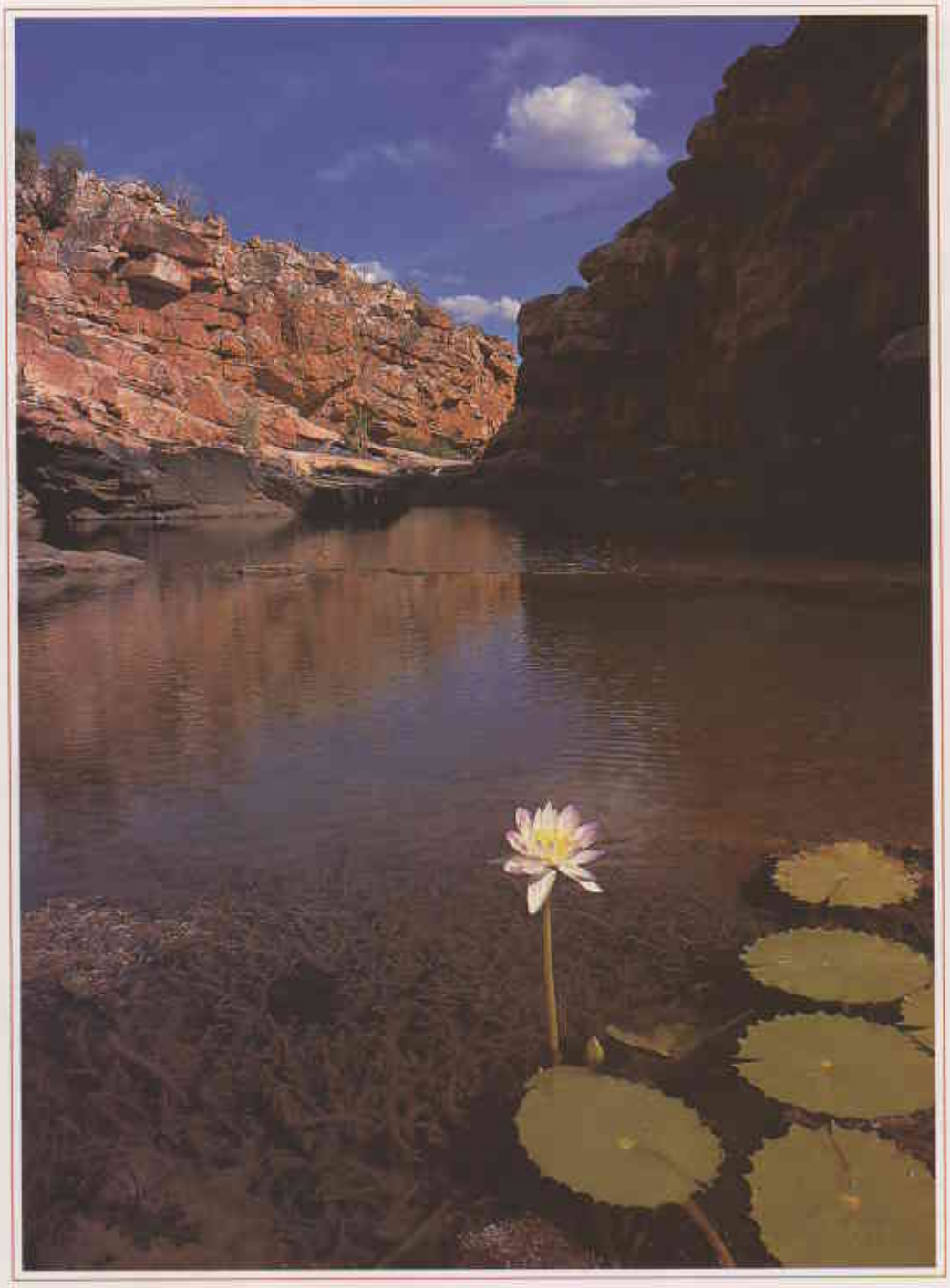


THE FRAGILE FRONTIER

by Carolyn Thomson, Chris Done and Allen Grosse

The Kimberley is remote to most of us, but it has a lot to offer. Enthralling gorges, sweeping plains; plateaux hundreds of metres high; sandy deserts speckled with oases; and rocky outcrops clinging to each other in formations which defy gravity.

It's a place of haunting loveliness. Yet the Kimberley's very beauty is getting it into trouble.

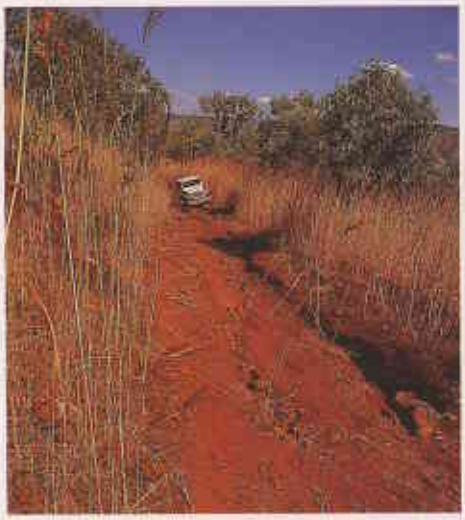
THE Kimberley is one of the world's last wild places. To begin with, it is huge. It covers more than 320 000 square kilometres of Western Australia, which makes it bigger than the State of Victoria. The terrain is not only ancient but varied - broad plains, ranges of rugged hills, flat-topped mesas, and broad tidal flats. The Indian Ocean sculpts showplaces into the coast; at Walcott Inlet, for example, tidal water rises 10 metres into a natural inlet behind. Inland, vast waters cleave through rocky gorges, carving chasms through schist and shale. The rugged landscape is patchworked by gorges, waterfalls and rainforests, which act as a haven for wildlife. Aboriginal rock art, including the stylised figures of the Wandjina, decorates overhanging rock ledges throughout the land.

Ironically, the same spectacular, varied beauty that attracts people in their thousands may yet be the cause of its downfall. The Kimberley caters to a wide range of visitors seeking a variety of experiences, from solitude to group touring, from bush walking to flying. Intriguing natural features like Geikie Gorge, and the Bungle Bungle massif with its eroded beehive mounds, are increasingly famous drawcards for visitors. The region now has seven declared national parks and several major nature reserves, but it needs many more. Some of its most fragile and beautiful areas are gradually being damaged.

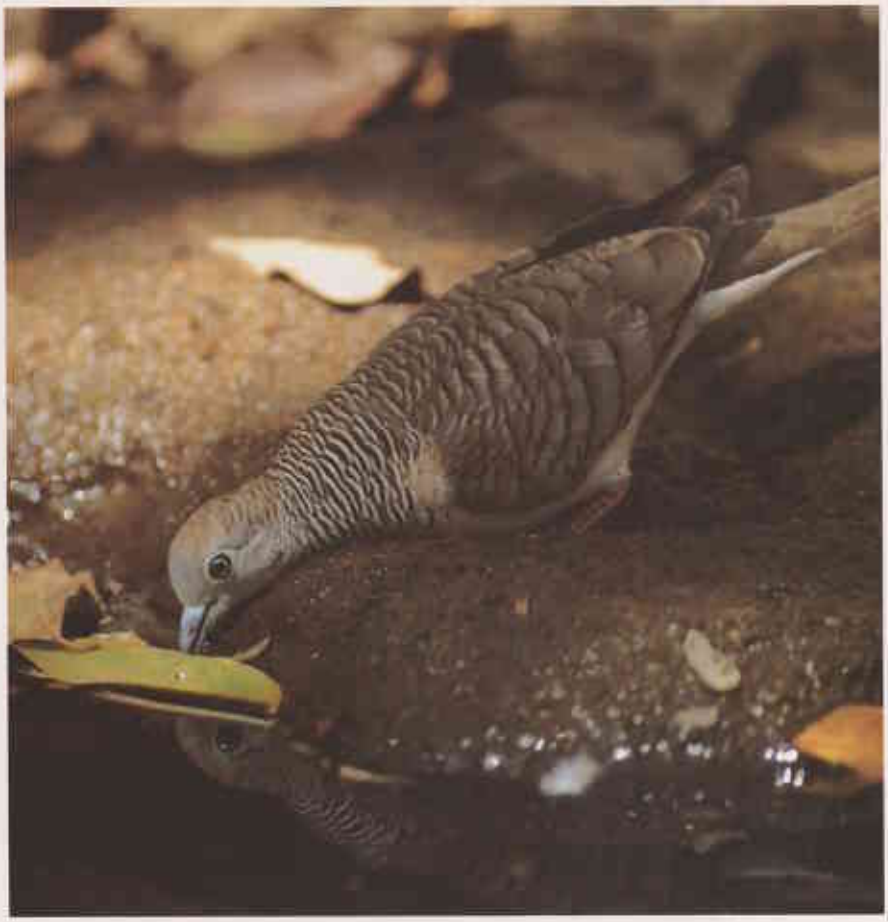
In the last decade, the Kimberley - although thousands of kilometres north of Perth - has become accessible to large numbers of eager, four-wheel-drive tourists. Visitors are welcome in the Kimberley, but those who have no care where they go and what they do are leaving a most unwelcome mark. Even taking the best care, large numbers of visitors can cause the vegetation of this fragile land to deteriorate. With heavy traffic the soil is compacted, preventing plants from regenerating. Because of this compacting, water cannot penetrate the soil, and during heavy rainfall it runs off into other areas, causing erosion and silt.

The kapok bush *(Cochlospermum fraseri)* found typically in dry rocky areas of north-western Australia.
Photo - Jiri Lochman ▲

A billabong at peace - one of the quiet places of the Kimberley.
Photo - Marie Lochman ▼



Large numbers of visitors can cause the fragile land of the north to deteriorate.
Photo - Marie Lochman ▲



The widespread extinctions that have occurred in the rest of the State have not taken place in the remotest parts of the Kimberley - almost all fauna species that should be present are still there.
Photo - Jiri Lochman ▶

OPENING UP

After Alexander Forrest led a land expedition through the Kimberley and spoke of "well-watered land suitable for pastoral purposes", pastoralists began to open up the country along the Ord River Valley and the Fitzroy River basin. Today about 225 000 square kilometres of the Kimberley is taken up with some form of pastoral activity, supporting 99 leases and carrying up to 600 000 head of cattle.

Now a different form of "opening up" is taking place. In some previously inaccessible areas, tracks have been put down over the last 20-30 years by pastoralists or mining exploration companies, allowing admission to adventurous visitors.

OVERUSE

The results are clear to see. With increased use, pristine caves in the Oscar Ranges have deteriorated rapidly in the last few years. Stalactites have been broken off, and some caves have been defaced and covered with graffiti. In another part of the region, travelling the Gibb River Road used to be one of the great outback adventures. The rugged country it traverses is punctuated at regular intervals by inviting creeks, shady campsites, gorges and waterholes. Among its attractions are Bell Creek, Galvans Gorge and Adcock Gorge. But now, large numbers of travellers have discovered the road. When too many people visit a fragile area which can't cater for them, the consequences include damage to tracks, littering, vegetation removal, bushfires and gully erosion.

Camping areas can become denuded of vegetation, especially because people tend to burn off the land to clear it for camping. Take the case of Manning Gorge, a once pretty part of the Kimberley region. Originally a quiet spot known and enjoyed only by a few, it is now the haunt of hundreds. It became such a popular place that toilets and other amenities were erected, tourists paying a fee for the privilege. After two years the camping site deteriorated - what was once a pleasantly grassed river area became a dustbowl. The case of Manning Gorge is not an isolated incident; many such cases occur throughout the region.

Some shires have organised rubbish collections from a small number of areas. But other people have installed barbecues and rubbish facilities without arranging for maintenance or collection.

CONTROLLING THE PROBLEM

The increasing interest in these areas is creating a dilemma for tourism and conservation authorities. The problem is that although the Department of Conservation and Land Management (CALM) manages national parks and nature reserves, no single authority is responsible for managing other places.

The fact that these uncontrolled and increasing visits could cause environmental damage has been recognised since the 1960s, when the Australian Academy of Science made recommendations to conserve flora and fauna in the region. In 1977 the Environmental Protection Authority (EPA), through its System Seven Report, recognised the need to bring areas of the Kimberley under active management. Those areas are often the same ones now coming under increasing visitor pressure because of the accessibility of their spectacular landforms.

In 1987 submissions to the State Government called for up to 40 new national parks and reserves to be set up in the Kimberley. Major areas which have yet to be reserved include Packsaddle Swamp near Kununurra, and the proposed

Mitchell Falls, on the Mitchell Plateau, is a drawcard for visitors to this remote area. There are plans to include it in a national park.
Photo - Jiri Lochman ▲

Seeing freshwater crocodiles in their natural habitat is one of the highlights of a visit to the Kimberley.
Photo - Ian Duncan ▼

Roebuck Bay Marine Reserve. The Rowley Shoals, whose atolls boast some of the world's best pristine coral formations, has just been declared a marine park.

The Mitchell Plateau, 270 kilometres west-north-west of Wyndham, is one of the most scenic and biologically important areas in the State. The Mitchell River, flowing northwards, drains into Walmsley Bay and Admiralty Gulf, carving gorges and waterfalls into the underlying sandstone. With the plateau fast becoming a tourist attraction, co-operation between CALM, the Western Australian Tourism Commission, the Department of Sport and Recreation and a bauxite mining company interested in the land has resulted in signs being erected and brochures about access being made available for tourists. These are simple but major steps towards fuller protection of the environment.

In addition, a lot of work has been put into the Kimberley Regional Planning Study by members of the public, interest groups and CALM. The report of the study should offer further encouragement for the creation of new parks and reserves.

NORTH-WEST BOUND

The number of visitors to the Kimberley continues to swell. The lands they visit are sometimes highly vulnerable, and CALM is pushing for some of them to be reserved. In the meantime, the travelling public needs to be informed about conservation of the Kimberley environment - starting with basic do's and don't's, such as staying on existing tracks and leaving no litter behind. As far as the Kimberley is concerned, the best kind of tourist is the one who does not leave a mark.

CALM has just published a book entitled *North-West Bound*, a useful and attractive guide for tourists, which has something to say on the matter:

"Throughout the Kimberley there are a number of wild and remote areas. Some are so isolated and have terrain so rugged that, since the original Aboriginal inhabitants left the land, few people have visited them, except by boat. There is no road access to the Prince Regent Nature Reserve and no public access to the Drysdale River National Park and Walcott Inlet.

"In most of these places all of the original animal species remain, unlike most other places in WA, where some animals have become extinct and others teeter on the brink of becoming so.

"These are fragile, sensitive places . . . they are important refuges for fauna, which can breed and multiply in peace."

We couldn't have said it better! ◘

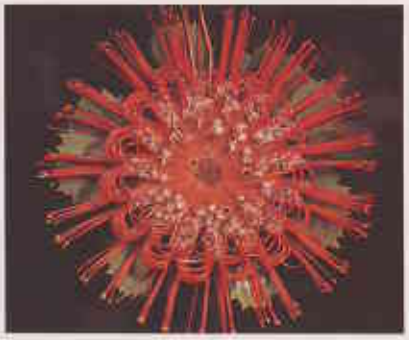
Chris Done is CALM's Regional Manager of the Kimberley Region, Allen Grosse is District Manager of the West Kimberley and Carolyn Thomson edited CALM's new publication *North-West Bound*.

In the central Kimberley, a screw-pine-surrounded creek - just one of the threatened areas in this fragile frontier. Turn to page 22.

Until 1984 more was known about what was underneath the Nullarbor than what was on top. But with such a vast area to study, where do we start? See page 16.

LANDSCOPE

VOLUME SIX NO. 1 - SPRING EDITION 1990



Public awareness and involvement is vital in the conservation of WA's rare and endangered flora. Page 49.

Ten WA mammal species have become extinct in the last 200 years. What can be done to ensure no more are lost forever? Page 28.

Forests protect our environment. They also provide timber. How do we strike a balance? Turn to page 35.

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COVER

Dolphins and whales are perhaps the best-known inhabitants of Western Australia's coastal waters. But this unique area is also home to an astonishing range of marine flora and fauna, from sea-turtles and coral reefs in the north to sea-grass banks and great white sharks in the south. See page 10.

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