



IN THIS ISSUE

Foreword

Paving the way for
Australia's biggest park

Turtle monitoring at
Eighty Mile Beach

Island cameras snap
expanded wildlife range

Rubbing out rubber vine

Kimberley Science and Conservation News

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Department of
Parks and Wildlife



Making a difference in the Kimberley

One of the delights of being the Minister for Environment is truly being able to make a difference in protecting our natural treasures.

This week the Premier Colin Barnett and I announced that the spectacular and unique landscape of the Mitchell Plateau will be included in a new Kimberley National Park, thanks to a historic agreement between the State Government, Rio Tinto and Alcoa of Australia.

We have now introduced Legislation to State Parliament to terminate a State Agreement from 1971 that allowed the development of an alumina refinery and bauxite mine in the Mitchell Plateau region.

Now, this jewel in the crown of the Kimberley will form part of a new Western Australian national park to rival Kakadu in size and biodiversity, surrounded on its coastal boundary by new marine parks.

This achievement of the Liberal-National Government gives impetus to the other on-going work to conserve the landscapes, plants and animals of the Kimberley. The Government is continuing

negotiations to create other new national parks and marine parks and advancing the scientific research that underpins the management of these protected areas.

The Liberal-National Government is also developing environmentally sensitive nature-based tourism in the Kimberley to make it easier for more people to appreciate the outstanding qualities of the region. This also generates employment opportunities for Aboriginal communities. We have completed work on visitor facilities at Geikie Gorge, Tunnel Creek and Purnululu national parks.

I am looking forward to travelling more to the Kimberley this year to promote the region as a critically important conservation, tourism and cultural destination.

Environment Minister
Albert Jacob



Above: Humpback whales in Lalang-garram / Camden Sound Marine Park.
Photo – Doug Coughran/Parks and Wildlife



Paving the way for Australia's biggest park

A new national park in Western Australia's Kimberley region is a step closer, with the State Government and the Mitchell Plateau Joint Venture partners, Rio Tinto and Alcoa, agreeing to terminate the State Agreement that provides for bauxite mining on the scenic and biologically important Mitchell Plateau.



Above: Mitchell Falls. Photo – Cathy Zwick

Premier and State Development Minister Colin Barnett announced the successful completion of negotiations to terminate the *Alumina Refinery (Mitchell Plateau) Agreement Act 1971*.

"Terminating this State Agreement will allow more than 175,000ha of the Mitchell Plateau to be included in the proposed Kimberley National Park," Mr Barnett said.

"The creation of a Kimberley National Park was a key election commitment of this Government. The termination of this long-standing agreement is an important milestone towards achieving this commitment.

The Government has been negotiating with Rio Tinto subsidiary Mitchell Plateau Bauxite Co. and Alcoa of Australia since late 2013 to terminate the agreement.

The State Agreement, entered into in 1971, was intended to ultimately develop bauxite mining and an alumina refinery on the Mitchell Plateau.

"I would like to extend Western Australia's thanks to the Mitchell Plateau Joint Venture for its close and cooperative work with Government, and for its efforts to aid conservation in the Kimberley," Mr Barnett said.

Legislation to terminate the Agreement was introduced to Parliament on 24 March.

The Government is engaging with Dambimangari, Wunambal Gaambera and Wilinggin Traditional Owners to secure agreement to create and jointly manage the proposed Kimberley National Park and adjoining network of marine reserves, under the State Government's *Kimberley Science and Conservation Strategy*.

The Mitchell Plateau is an elevated laterite-capped plain, featuring spectacular gorges and waterfalls cascading over blocky layers of King Leopold Sandstone.

It is one of few areas in the State where fan palm forests are a prominent feature, and patches of rainforest grow around the margins of the plateau.

The wild, remote scenery of this area is attracting an increasing number of visitors, including those who fly in from Kununurra or from coastal cruise vessels.



Turtle monitoring at Eighty Mile Beach Marine Park

Dedicated volunteers have been recording flatback turtle nesting at Eighty Mile Beach Marine Park to help conserve and understand the threatened species.

The Eighty Mile Beach Turtle Monitoring Program, jointly funded by Parks and Wildlife and BHP Billiton Iron Ore was expanded in 2014 to include satellite tagging of 10 mature flatback turtles (*Natator depressus*).

The project is a collaborative effort by Parks and Wildlife, Karajarri rangers and Nyangumarta traditional owners.

“We have seen one turtle return to the ocean and come up to the beach again to nest two weeks after the transmitter was attached,” Parks and Wildlife visitor interpretation officer Sara McAllister said.

“Each of the tagged turtles has been named and members of the public can track their movements via the internet.”

This year’s monitoring program began in mid-October and featured more than 100 volunteers, including guests staying at the Eighty Mile Beach Caravan Park, local residents and Broome-based volunteers, assisting with night monitoring.

Thirty turtles were observed laying eggs and, after their nests were marked, remote cameras were installed to monitor activity and nest disturbance by predators such as foxes. Information collected assists in deciding where and how to conduct any predator control programs.

Eighty Mile Beach Marine Park was established under the *Kimberley Science and*

Conservation Strategy and is a significant flatback turtle rookery. More than 1200 turtle activities, including nesting and false crawls, were observed this season, which is consistent with data recorded in previous years.

Watch a video of The Turtle Nesting Experience at Eighty Mile Beach Marine Park at www.dpaw.wa.gov.au

Tagged turtles can be tracked at http://www.seaturtle.org/tracking/index.shtml?project_id=1053.

Top left: Traditional owners help with satellite tagging of turtles at Eighty Mile Beach Marine Park. *Photo – Parks and Wildlife*

Click **here** for the link or scan the QR code below to view the Turtle Nesting Experience video.



Island cameras snap expanded wildlife range

Remote cameras installed on Adolphus Island in the east Kimberley to monitor northern quolls are revealing a far greater range of wildlife than previously recorded.

The cameras have captured images of the Eurasian hoopoe bird (*Upupa epops*) visiting the island in October 2014, only the third sighting of the species in Australia.

"It was first spotted in 2011 at Roebuck Plains Roadhouse and then in February 2014 at Galiwinku on Elcho Island in the Northern Territory," Parks and Wildlife State cane toad program leader Corrin Everitt said.

"Australian sightings of the hoopoe, whose native range is Eurasia and north-west Africa, are thought to be a result of the birds flying off course during their migration."

The 35 cameras installed on Adolphus Island, in the Balangarra Native Title Area in the east Kimberley on the Ord River less than 2km from the riverbank, also recorded large numbers of native bird species, including Brahminy kites, collared sparrowhawk and wedge-tailed eagles.

"Our bird list for the island has almost doubled from what was recorded during the 2008-09 large-scale biodiversity inventory survey conducted by the department.

"Saltwater crocodiles and endangered northern quolls, spiny-tailed monitors (*Varanus acanthurus*) and black-palmed rock monitors (*Varanus glebopalma*) were also recorded, all of which are susceptible to being poisoned by cane toads.

"Colonies of northern spiny-tailed geckos on the edges of salt flats were also observed."

Parks and Wildlife, the Balangarra Rangers and traditional owners will continue to monitor northern quoll and cane toad populations on Adolphus Island in 2015 as part of the *Kimberley Science and Conservation Strategy*.



Top left: Hoopoe bird. **Top right:** Pheasant coucal. **Above left:** Rock-wallaby. **Above right:** Ridgetail monitor. *Photos – Parks and Wildlife*

"Next month we will conduct camera trap baiting and camera maintenance, to help determine cane toad distribution and abundance," Ms Everitt said.

"Further work will include taste aversion trials for quolls and potentially field trialling the effectiveness of new pheromones to reduce cane toad breeding success. Taste aversion relies on the ability of quolls to learn not to eat cane toads following their exposure to toad meat sausages injected with a nausea-inducing salt.



Rubbing out rubber vine

Noxious rubber vine in the Kimberley is heading towards extinction thanks to the efforts of government departments, community groups, industry groups, pastoralists and members of the public over a number of years, and the innovative control methods being used.

Rubber vine (*Cryptostegia grandiflora*), a Weed of National Significance, is known from two populations in the Kimberley – one at Willare, 165 km east of Broome, and the other at the southern end of Lake Argyle, 90 km south of Kununurra.

The eradication effort has been led by the Department of Agriculture and Food with help from the State Government's *Kimberley Science and Conservation Strategy* and the Department of Parks and Wildlife and State NRM plus community groups such as the Kimberley Rangelands Biosecurity Association, Ord Land and Water, Rangelands NRM, Environs Kimberley, Rio Tinto and pastoral stations.

John Szymanski, Program Manager of the Willare—West Kimberley Rubber Vine Eradication Program said rubber vine was one of Australia's worst introduced weeds. However, thanks to the innovative Project Aquila, volunteers can now assist by searching for rubber vine in the comfort of their own homes."

"At the end of the wet season, mature plants are flowering and highly visible, making it an ideal time to search for and capture images of rubber vine along the Fitzroy River by helicopter.

"These images are then presented over the internet. Anyone with a computer can now help find rubber vine."

To learn more about the Willare project, which at 265 square kilometres is set to be the largest successful weed eradication project in Australia, go to friendsofthefitzroy.com.au or visit Facebook at facebook.com/aquilaproject

At Lake Argyle, Parks and Wildlife staff recently used a helicopter-mounted flamethrower as part of their eradication efforts. Rubber



vine is known to be particularly susceptible to fire, but access to the infestation across the flooded plains of Lake Argyle can be particularly difficult.

Parks and Wildlife District Fire Coordinator Nathan Connor, who led the operation, said the burn appeared to have achieved excellent results.

"Aerial burning using the flamethrower gives us a great tool for future control operations, allowing us access when we'd normally have to wait several months for flood waters to recede."

Right: One of only 45 rubber vine plants located during this year's aerial search of the Fitzroy River Valley by Friends of the Fitzroy.

