

East Kimberley Impact Assessment Project

EAST KIMBERLEY IMPACT ASSESSMENT PROJECT
Project description and feasibility study

East Kimberley Working Paper No.1
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A Joint Project Of The:

Centre for Resource and Environmental Studies
Australian National University

Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies

Anthropology Department
University of Western Australia

Academy of the Social Sciences in Australia



The aims of the project are as follows:

1. To compile a comprehensive profile of the contemporary social environment of the East Kimberley region utilising both existing information sources and limited fieldwork.
2. Develop and utilise appropriate methodological approaches to social impact assessment within a multi-disciplinary framework.
3. Assess the social impact of major public and private developments of the East Kimberley region's resources (physical, mineral and environmental) on resident Aboriginal communities. Attempt to identify problems/issues which, while possibly dormant at present, are likely to have implications that will affect communities at some stage in the future.
4. Establish a framework to allow the dissemination of research results to Aboriginal communities so as to enable them to develop their own strategies for dealing with social impact issues.
5. To identify in consultation with Governments and regional interests issues and problems which may be susceptible to further research.

Views expressed in the Project's publications are the views of the authors, and are not necessarily shared by the sponsoring organisations.

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An examination of the impact of environmental and mineral resource development on Aboriginal communities in the East Kimberley region of Western Australia and of the response options available to Governments, developers and the communities themselves.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The East Kimberley region comprises the northernmost area of the State of Western Australia, and adjoins the eastern border of the Northern Territory along a length of approximately 500 kilometres (see attached map at Appendix Two). The major centres of population are Kununurra, Wyndham, and Halls Creek. Major Aboriginal communities are Oombulgurri, Warmun (Turkey Creek), Billiluma, Lake Gregory and Balgo. A substantial number of Aborigines reside on pastoral leases and outstations in the region.

The 1981 population figures for the Shires of Wyndham-East Kimberley and Halls Creek are 5259 and 2541 respectively. The population of the East Kimberley is thus somewhat above 8000 (making allowance for the population on the Northern Territory side of the border). In 1981 the Aboriginal population of the two shires was 3193, or just above 40 per cent (Western Australia, 1984). There is some suggestion from Department of Aboriginal Affairs' census information that these population figures may be understated (Dixon *et al.*, 1984)

The anticipated population growth rate for the period to 1988 in the East Kimberley is 5.5 per cent per annum, which would imply a regional population of some 10800 in 1988. The population of the region grew at about 5.3 per cent between 1976 and 1981; these growth rates are among the highest in Australia (Western Australia, 1984).

The area has long been the focus of policies to 'develop the north', notably through the Beef Roads scheme, and the Ord River Irrigation Project. However, in many respects the East Kimberley has remained until recently, 'a neglected region' (Kelly 1971: 47). During recent years a number of political, social and economic developments have given the region greater prominence both within Western Australia and nationally. The failure of the Ord Scheme to live up to expectations has become the

epitome of the difficulties facing northern development. Governments have come to place much more emphasis on mineral development, tourism, and (to a lesser extent) a revival of pastoral activities as engines for economic development. In particular, the discovery of the Argyle diamond deposit and expectations of the tourist potential of the Bungle Bungle massif seem likely to channel and focus substantial private and public sector resources into the East Kimberley region over the next five years.

The position of Aborigines in the East Kimberley region has long been disadvantaged *vis a vis* the non-Aboriginal population in terms of political influence, socio-economic status, health, and environmental conditions. The initial establishment of the pastoral industry deprived Aborigines of *de jure* ownership of their traditional lands, but did not in many cases deprive Aboriginal people of *access* to or substantial occupancy of those lands. A series of changes in the late 1960s and early 1970s, however, including the progressive introduction of equal wages, the increasing reliance on capital intensive investment in the pastoral industry, and the establishment of the Ord River Irrigation Area (ORIA) and Ord River Catchment Regeneration Project have led to the dislocation of Aboriginal communities throughout the region with consequent social disruption. In 1978, a Joint Commonwealth-State Review of the Ord Project accepted that 'the development of the ORIA has contributed to the dislocation of the life and religion of Aboriginal people living in the area ...' (ORIA Review 1978: 5), and recommended that the Commonwealth and Western Australian Governments examine the impact of development on Aborigines in the region. Nothing came of that recommendation.

The Ashton Joint Venture's Argyle diamond mine is the largest resource project in the region, and Australia's first major diamond mine. It involved a capital expenditure of \$450 million dollars, a

construction workforce of over 1000, and includes a construction townsite, airstrip, and extensive infrastructure. Furthermore, the AJV, and numerous other mining companies continue active diamond exploration projects across the whole of the Kimberley and beyond.

The AJV and local Aboriginal communities have had extensive mutual dealings since 1979, when the deposit was discovered. The Aboriginal/developer relationship has been characterised by a complex interaction of government policy, the economic objectives of the project developers, and Aboriginal cultural and economic concerns. It has involved elements of intense conflict, ongoing negotiation, and mutual co-operation. It is not clear however what the outcome of this process has been to date, nor what medium and long-term implications arise for Aboriginal residents of the region.

The emphasis on tourism as a base for economic and social development of the region has been growing for at least a decade, and has been focussed largely on the scenic attraction of Lake Argyle; in the past three years, however, the region itself has emerged as a major priority with the 'discovery' of the Kimberley's natural and physical resources, particularly the Bungle Bungle massif. The Bungle Bungles have received extensive media coverage, and have become the focus of intensive policy-making activity. The recent report by a working group appointed to investigate the future status of the Bungle Bungle massif and adjoining lands has made it clear that the future of the Bungle Bungles is especially significant in policy terms, because it involves competing land-use interests in the Kimberley: conservation, pastoralism, Aboriginal interests, tourism, and mining.

Although it seems certain that there will be some level of Aboriginal involvement in any future National Park that includes the

Bungle Bungles, the long-term implications of the establishment of such a park, and concomitant tourist activities are yet to be ascertained.

In summary, the development and utilisation of the resources and environment of the East Kimberley are increasingly seen as the means of regional economic development by public policymakers. It is far from clear that policies will be socially optimal within a regional context, especially in relation to the long-term Aboriginal residents.

2. ORIGINS OF THE PROJECT

In addition to approaching the AIAS, the Warmun Community at Turkey Creek in early 1980 wrote a number of letters to the Commonwealth Government seeking assessment of the impact of diamond mining on Aboriginal communities in the region. Their approaches were set aside, on the basis that the matter was a State responsibility. Dillon (1984; 78-89) discusses these approaches in detail.

The AJV, in its Environmental Review and Management Program, (ERMP) recognized that there is a need to 'monitor' social and economic changes in the region, but argued that government has the major responsibility (Dames and Moore 1982, 244). The WA Environmental Protection Authority (EPA) in its recommendations to the Government, argued that it was the company's responsibility to 'closely monitor the social impacts of its development' (Western Australia 1983, 1).

On 16 May, 1983, the WA Cabinet considered the EPA recommendations, and decided, inter alia, that

An Impact Group be established comprising representatives of Government, Company, and local communities, including Aboriginal groups, to monitor and review and recommend to

Government the social impact of the project with a view to further development of the Government and Company's social programme.

That decision has never been implemented (at least in the form envisaged). See Dillon (1984: 89-97) for a detailed analysis.

This brief overview is sufficient to demonstrate that the existence of social impacts on Aboriginal communities has been recognized by the major actors and interest groups in the region, as has the need for some form of assessment and monitoring. The decision to establish the present project is in large measure the result of the absence of such an ongoing assessment program in the region. The project will provide an independent perspective not possible in a study based in the region and sponsored by some of the major protagonists.

3. PREVIOUS RESEARCH RELEVANT TO THE PROJECT

Two areas of research are of immediate relevance to this project: the literature on social impact assessment including studies in an Australian Aboriginal context; and the literature on the East Kimberley itself.

3.1 Social impact assessment

The literature on social impact assessment is growing rapidly, and is largely a North American phenomenon. Bowles (1981) reviews the substantive and methodological literature in relation to small communities and attempts to integrate the dominant themes into a coherent framework. He argues that three major dimensions of community experience are affected by external impacts: the *social vitality* of the community, the *viability*

of local economy, and the *internal political efficacy* of the community (Bowles 1981: 3). He points out that much of the literature on impact assessment is empirical in emphasis and under-emphasises a theoretical approach which might produce generalisations applicable elsewhere. Tester and Myles (1981) and Geisler *et al.* (1982) have edited collections which have a substantial focus on social impacts in indigenous communities. The Berger Inquiry into the Mackenzie Valley Pipeline remains the best example of social impact assessment in relation to indigenous people (Berger 1977; Gamble 1978). Dillon (1985) has attempted to explore the relationship between the policy process, policy analysis, and social impact assessment.

In Australia, there has been surprisingly little work done in the field of social impact assessment, and even less in relation to Aborigines. The Ranger Uranium Environmental Inquiry headed by Justice Fox was the first instance where the potential impacts of major development projects on Aboriginal society were explored by a Government Inquiry (Fox 1977, chapters 4 and 13). This was followed by the establishment of a major project to assess and report to the Government on the social impact of uranium mining in the Northern Territory (AIAS 1984). That project was based on intensive fieldwork by a small team of social scientists over a period of five years. The project identified a number of impacts of resource development in the region, many of them secondary. It identified broader developments for Aboriginal communities in the Alligator Rivers region such as the lack of accumulated capital within Aboriginal society and the impingement of 'higher orders of institutional politics' on communities that were then unaware of the existence and/or nature of the institutional processes involved. The project describes the extant civic culture as one in which disunity, stress, hostility, and a sense of being drowned by new laws, agencies, and

agendas, are major manifestations. That and the social strains arising from the ongoing decision-making processes relating to new mines and new resources (royalties, employment, vehicles) led the authors of the study to conclude that Aboriginal society in the region is in a state of crisis.

Without necessarily questioning the validity of that conclusion, a number of critical points about the AIAS project are worth noting. It appears not to have been framed in policy-relevant terms, nor to have developed a cohesive methodological approach, and this is reflected in its minimal influence on policy affecting the region. A number of caveats should be made here: one is that the AIAS project has collected a significant amount of base line data in a region which will be dominated by resource development and tourism for at least the next fifty years, data that would be crucial components of any future impact assessments. Secondly, the Project team did deal with a number of political and policy developments during the course of the study. Thirdly, the very existence of the project, with staff on the ground, may have had a significant impact on institutional performance in the region and thus mitigated potential social impacts arising out of the establishment of the mines and the National Park.

Some research related to social impact of mining on East Kimberley Aboriginal communities has been undertaken. This will be discussed below.

3.2 East Kimberley Region

Anthropological research was carried out in the region in the 1930s by Kaberry (1939) and Elkin (1932) amongst others. A substantial amount has been written on the physical aspects of the region, its potential for development, and the Ord River scheme; however, this literature is only

tangential for our purposes. A submission to the ORIA Review by the Moongoong Darwung Association Inc. (1977) was the beginning of a series of submissions and documents focussing on the impact of development of northern Australia on Aborigines in the region. The Report of the ORIA Review (1978) contained the first official recognition (in published form) of the existence of social impact on Aboriginal communities in the region arising out of Government sponsored development projects. A number of researchers (including Palmer and Williams (1980), Shaw (1981, 1983) Kirkby and Williams (1984) has recently examined aspects of Aboriginal culture and tradition in the region. This literature makes it quite clear that Aboriginal values, both traditional and non-traditional, are crucial determinants of the social environment of the region. The political conflict surrounding the Argyle project has been canvassed in, *inter alia*, Thompson (1981), Langton (1983), and Dillon (1984).

The extant literature on the social impact of the Argyle mine arises in a very real sense out of the political conflict engendered by the mine, and is to some extent coloured by it. The most extensive work carried out to date is the study which was incorporated into the Draft EIS by Wilson and Wilson (Dames and Moore 1982). It is a sophisticated document which recognises the existence of negative social consequences of mining, but which, without the appearance of tendentiousness, minimises their significance. Cousins and Nieuwenhuysen (1984) and particularly Christensen (1983) have offered critiques of the social impact section of the Argyle EIS on the grounds that it involved selective research and downplayed the existence of a conflict of interest between Aborigines and miners. Dixon *et al.* (1984) in a report to the Kimberley Land Council and the National Aboriginal Conference examined the potential and actual roles of State and Commonwealth Governments in assessing and mitigating social

impact, and undertook a preliminary identification of the areas of social impact of mining on the Aboriginal communities of the region. They include issues such as access to land, protection of Aboriginal sites, economic independence and compensation programs, employment, law enforcement, education and training, tourism, and administrative and political impact. The report concludes by calling for the establishment of an independent Impact Assessment Monitoring Group with the functions of (i) establishing comprehensive base-line data on the contemporary social environment; (ii) developing assessment methodologies which are relevant to the region and take into account the Aboriginal world view; (iii) identifying impacts both positive and negative, their magnitude and intensity; (iv) developing positive social programs to prevent or mitigate negative social impacts; and (v) undertaking consultation with the affected communities in the development and implementation of strategies to mitigate negative impacts.

Recent literature on the region includes the Report of the Bungle Bungle Working Group to the Environmental Protection Authority (1985) and a subsequent report by the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Protection of Bungle Bungle (1985). Both these reports advocate the establishment of a national park in the Bungle Bungle region which involves both Aboriginal and tourist interests in park management. No research directed towards assessing the impact of the establishment of a park and the concomitant increase in tourist usage of the Bungle Bungle resource on Aboriginal communities has yet been undertaken.

Most recently, the report of the Kimberley Pastoral Industry Inquiry (1985) has been presented to a Cabinet Sub-Committee which recommends a major land-use study of the Kimberley region as part of a process leading to the restructuring of the region's pastoral industry.

4. AIMS AND OBJECTIVES OF THE PROJECT

The aims of the proposed project are as follows:

1. To compile a comprehensive profile of the contemporary social environment of the East Kimberley region utilising both existing information sources and limited fieldwork.
2. Develop and utilise appropriate methodological approaches to social impact assessment within a multi-disciplinary framework.
3. Assess the social impact of major public and private developments of the East Kimberley region's resources (physical, mineral and environmental) on resident Aboriginal communities. Attempt to identify problems/issues which, while possibly dormant at present, are likely to have implications that will affect communities at some stage in the future.
4. Establish a framework to allow the dissemination of research results to Aboriginal communities so as to enable them to develop their own strategies for dealing with social impact issues.
5. To identify in consultation with Governments and regional interests issues and problems which may be susceptible to further research.

We now deal with each of these in turn.

The first task is to collate systematically all existing information on the region. A first step will be the compilation of a working bibliography, and the establishment of a data base of research resources relevant to the study. This process has already begun.

A draft research agenda has been drawn up and is attached as Appendix 1. This is based on a comprehensive outline which categorises the contemporary social environment both diachronically and contextually.

The development and utilisation of appropriate methodological approaches to social impact assessment is perhaps the most difficult task facing the project. The literature on social impact assessment is still in what Thomas Kuhn has referred to as a 'pre-paradigm period'. Consequently there is no one accepted view of how impact assessments should be undertaken, what methodological tools are most suited, or whether impact assessments should be retrospective or prospective. There is also a clear tension between those who advocate comprehensiveness and those who advocate policy relevance. Finally, in the case of the present project, the fact that the region's social environment is characterised by the existence of differing and in many respects conflicting cultural value systems is a further complication.

The project aims to encourage research into these problems, and will establish as part of its data base a working bibliography of resources related to social impact assessment, especially those relevant to the Australian context or to indigenous populations affected by economic change initiated by externally controlled developments.

The structure proposed for the project (see below) is designed to ensure that multi-disciplinary perspectives are incorporated into the methodological approaches adopted. It is envisaged that the co-ordinating committee and executive officer will assist in ensuring that these multi-disciplinary inputs are focussed and integrated in productive ways.

Conceptually, the assessment of social impacts on a community may be broken down into the component parts of identification, measurement, and evaluation. This process involves a degree of interaction between

researcher and community. In the case of this project, individual researchers will, in the first instance, make their own contribution on specific topics utilising whatever data and methodological tools they find appropriate. The East Kimberley communities will have the opportunity to react to these institutions either informally while the research is being designed, or at the proposed workshop and conference, or both.

The establishment of a framework to provide for the systematic dissemination of the results of the research undertaken is seen as an integral part of the project. It is planned to be most fully developed as part of a second stage of the project, and its conduct at that stage is not expected to involve the same level or composition of financial commitment as stage one. The intention is that the second stage will emphasise the provision to Aboriginal communities of information, analysis, and perhaps professional advice which is not at present available to them. One early aspect of this provision would be to make available and/or accessible the data base built up by the Project in a 'user-friendly' form.

Finally, the Project recognises that it will be dealing with issues that either are, or will be, on the policy agendas of private and public sector organisations. It is important that the project's research effort be directed in ways which while maintaining the Project's independence, ensures that its outcome will be relevant to public and private sector activities in the region, and will identify issues which require further analysis and research. In particular, while it is recognised that resource development can have national and state policy implications which may overshadow regional considerations it may often be possible to maximise its net regional benefits without significantly affecting national and state policy objectives.

5. GENERAL HYPOTHESES

Past experience suggests:

1. That resource development has substantial social impacts on Aboriginal communities within a regional context.
2. That the net effect of the impact of resource development on Aboriginal communities is negative at least in the absence of property rights which ensure reasonable equality of bargaining power.

It is not however clear how far these impacts are capable of modification by appropriate policies private and governmental. We hope to test the hypothesis that the existing institutional and policy making context is a key determinant of the scope and intensity of the social impact of individual resource development projects.

Within this general context it is intended that the project's individual research projects will examine a whole range of specific hypotheses related to regional development, social change, and social indicators. No attempt is made here to specify those hypotheses, nor the approaches to be adopted in testing them; that will be left to individual researchers. It is expected, however, that the research undertaken for the Project will extend beyond mere description and will provide a valuable foundation for the formulation of policies by the major protagonists of change within the region.

6. PROJECT ORGANISATION

The Project is a joint activity of the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies (AIAS), the Centre for Resource and Environmental Studies at the ANU (CRES), and the Anthropology Department of the University of Western Australia. The Project will be planned and co-ordinated for these institutions by a planning and co-ordination committee consisting of Dr Nancy Williams (AIAS), Professor Robert Tonkinson (UWA) and Dr H.C. Coombs (CRES). An Executive Officer (presently Mr M.C.Dillon) will be employed to co-ordinate the Project's research activities (see below).

An advisory panel of senior academics has been established to assist the committee with the design of the study and to advise on the choice of researchers to participate in it. The panel comprises Professor Diana Howlett, Geographer; Dr Stephen Boyden, Human Ecologist; Dr R.J. May, Economist; Dr J. von Sturmer, Anthropologist; Professor John Holmes, Geographer; Professor A.S. Henderson, Social Psychiatrist; Professor Charles Rowley, Political Scientist; Professor James Crawford, Lawyer; and Dr Elizabeth Sommerlad, Educationist.

It is envisaged that a similar panel representative of Aboriginal communities and organisations in the East Kimberley region will be established. Moves to initiate the establishment of such a group have already been made.

The co-ordinating committee envisages the project will have two stages. The first will largely involve the first three objectives of the project: profiling, developing a multi-disciplinary methodological approach, and the initial assessment of impacts. The second stage will involve the establishment of a framework for conduct of specific research projects, dissemination of research results, and identification of

potential strategies and areas of future research. Stage one will be based on a workshop in the East Kimberley in late 1985 and culminate in a major conference in Canberra in the latter half of 1986. The committee is aware that the division of the project into two stages is in many senses quite arbitrary, and that it may well happen that elements of the second stage emerge during the workshop and conference or from work leading up to them. Nevertheless, such a division will make it easier for the project to be monitored more closely by the co-ordinating committee (and the sponsoring organisations) while providing the means to achieve an element of flexibility.

The co-ordinating committee has invited the advisory committee and a number of researchers (many with previous experience in the region) to indicate their availability and willingness to undertake some aspect of the research agenda (at Appendix 1). The co-ordinating committee and Executive Officer will themselves be involved in the research required.

7. SIGNIFICANCE OF THE PROJECT

The East Kimberley region is currently undergoing a process of social and economic change based largely on the assumption that mining and tourism will provide the impetus for sustained social and economic change. The Aboriginal residents of the region, numbering some 4000, represent the majority of the non-transient population. The search for policies which can assist them to contain the social costs which resource exploitation can impose upon them could have significant implications for the future of northern Australia.

The East Kimberley social environment is representative of the vast proportion of northern Australia, comprising over 60,000 Aboriginal people, and much of Australia's mineral resources. In studying the interaction between the exploitation of those resources and the Aboriginal residents the Project will therefore address issues of major significance for the development of northern Australia and the future of Aboriginal communities in the north.

The project will hopefully lead also to the clarification of the theoretical foundations of social impact assessment in the Australian context. We also expect that the Project will contribute to an improvement in the standard of such assessments, including those contained in environmental impact statements. Among other things, it will involve the detailed analysis and evaluation of the social environment which was the subject of one of the most comprehensive social impact studies yet incorporated in an Australian environmental impact statement.

Finally, the Project will, in its second stage, break new ground in the social impact assessment field through its firm commitment to establishing a framework where Aboriginal communities in the north can themselves assess the options and strategies available both to minimise

and mitigate the negative social impact of major resource developments and to maximise potential benefits they may confer.

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APPENDIX 1

DRAFT

EAST KIMBERLEY IMPACT ASSESSMENT PROJECT: RESEARCH AGENDA
(Attachment to report of feasibility study)

STAGE 1

A. THE REGION

1. General description
2. Natural features
3. Aboriginal Society
 - Demography
 - Social structure
 - Relationship with the land
 - Economy - sources of livelehood
 - Mobility - seasonal patterns
 - Allocation of time
4. History of white settlement

B. CONTEMPORARY ECONOMIC CHANGE

1. Renewable resources
 - Resource utilisation (hunting and gathering)
 - Resource stocks under current land use policies.
2. The pastoral industry - past, present and prospective
 - Technological change
 - Sources and direction of investment
 - Aborigines in Euro-Australian enterprises
 - Aboriginal owned enterprises
3. Mining
 - Review of resources
 - Mining and the national economy
 - The Argyle Diamond Mining Venture
 - sources of investment
 - operations
 - the work force
 - relations with Aborigines
 - value of output
 - distribution of proceeds
 - Exploration and other mining activities
4. Tourism
 - The tourist potential
 - The existing patterns
 - Plans for the future
 - Government
 - private enterprise
 - Aborigines
 - Relations with Aborigines
 - The National Park and other areas with tourist potential
 - Other controlled development areas

5. Public investment and administrative expenditure

- Pattern of public expenditure

- Administration, welfare, law and order, local government, etc.

- Infra-structure and support for private sector

- Aboriginal policy

- Impact on gross regional product

C. ABORIGINES OF THE REGION TODAY

- Recent history of Aboriginal communities

- Demography

- Social structure

- Relationship with the land

- Economy - sources of livelihood - real income

- effect of past land-use

- Mobility patterns, allocation of time

- Health

- Education

- Effects of recent Euro-Australian land-use on the Aboriginal social environment and economy

- Political organisation

- Aspirations

- Strategies for development

D. QUALITY OF LIFE INDICATORS

1. Methodological approaches

2. Indicators - qualitative and quantitative

- Environment experienced - physical, social, cultural

- Access to consumable resources indigenous; market based; services; real income

- Identity, self-management and decision making

- Educational and training opportunities

- Health - physical, psychic, morbidity by cause, mortality rates, nutritional status, life expectancy, criminality, drug addiction, social violence, apathy, anomie etc.

- Economic innovation - productive, organisational

- Cultural life - traditional and adaptive

- Political activity and institutional innovation

E. DEVELOPMENT STRATEGIES FOR EAST KIMBERLEY ABORIGINES - PRESENT IDEAS

- Aborigines

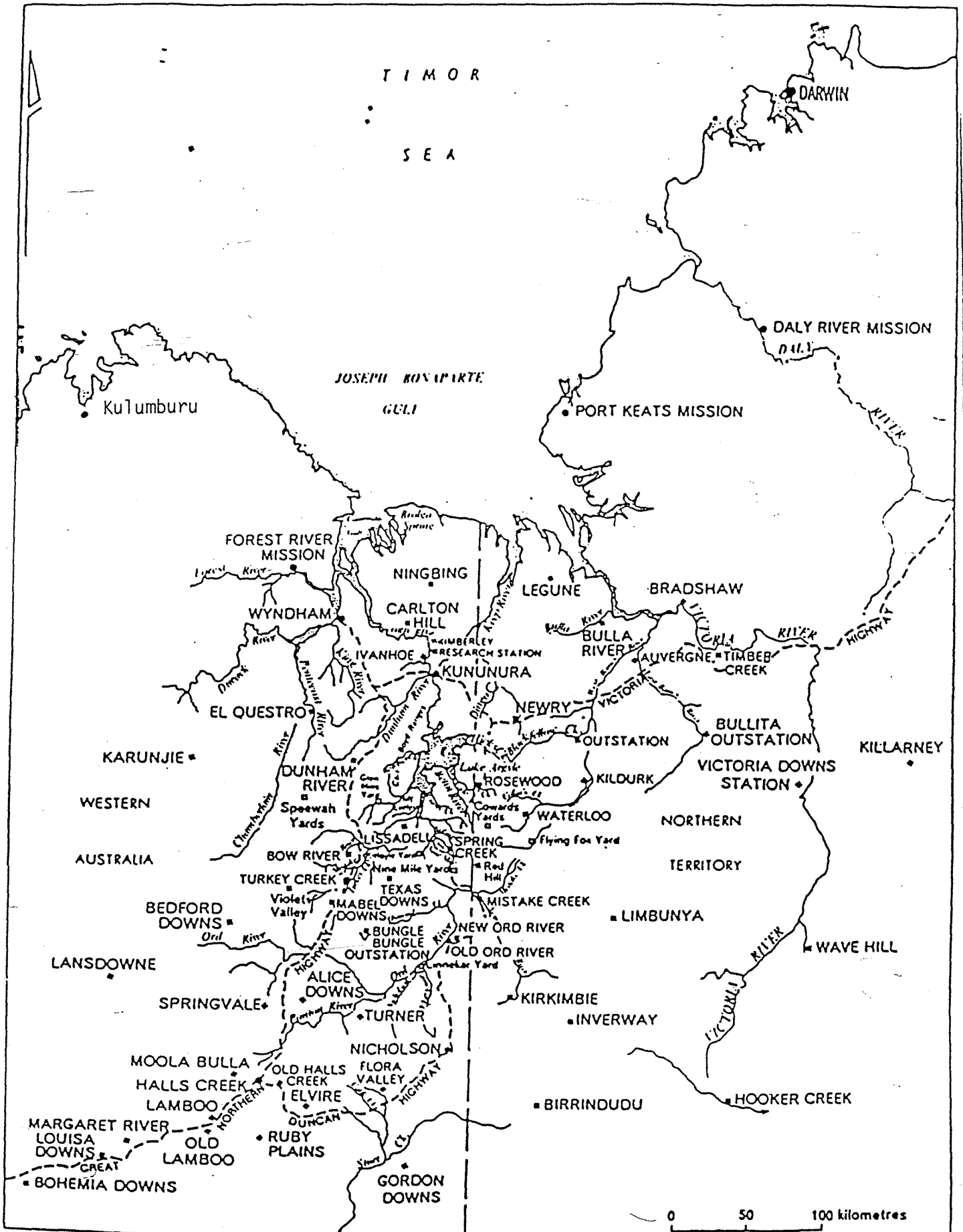
- Private sector

- Miners

- Tourist enterprises

- Pastoralists

- Government



Map 2. The East Kimberley region today.

SOURCE: Shaw (1983, 3). Reprinted from *Banggaiyerri: The Story of Jack Sullivan as told to Bruce Shaw* with permission from the publishers, The Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies.