

East Kimberley Impact Assessment Project

THE EAST KIMBERLEY REGION : RESEARCH GUIDE AND
SELECT REFERENCES

M.C. DILLON

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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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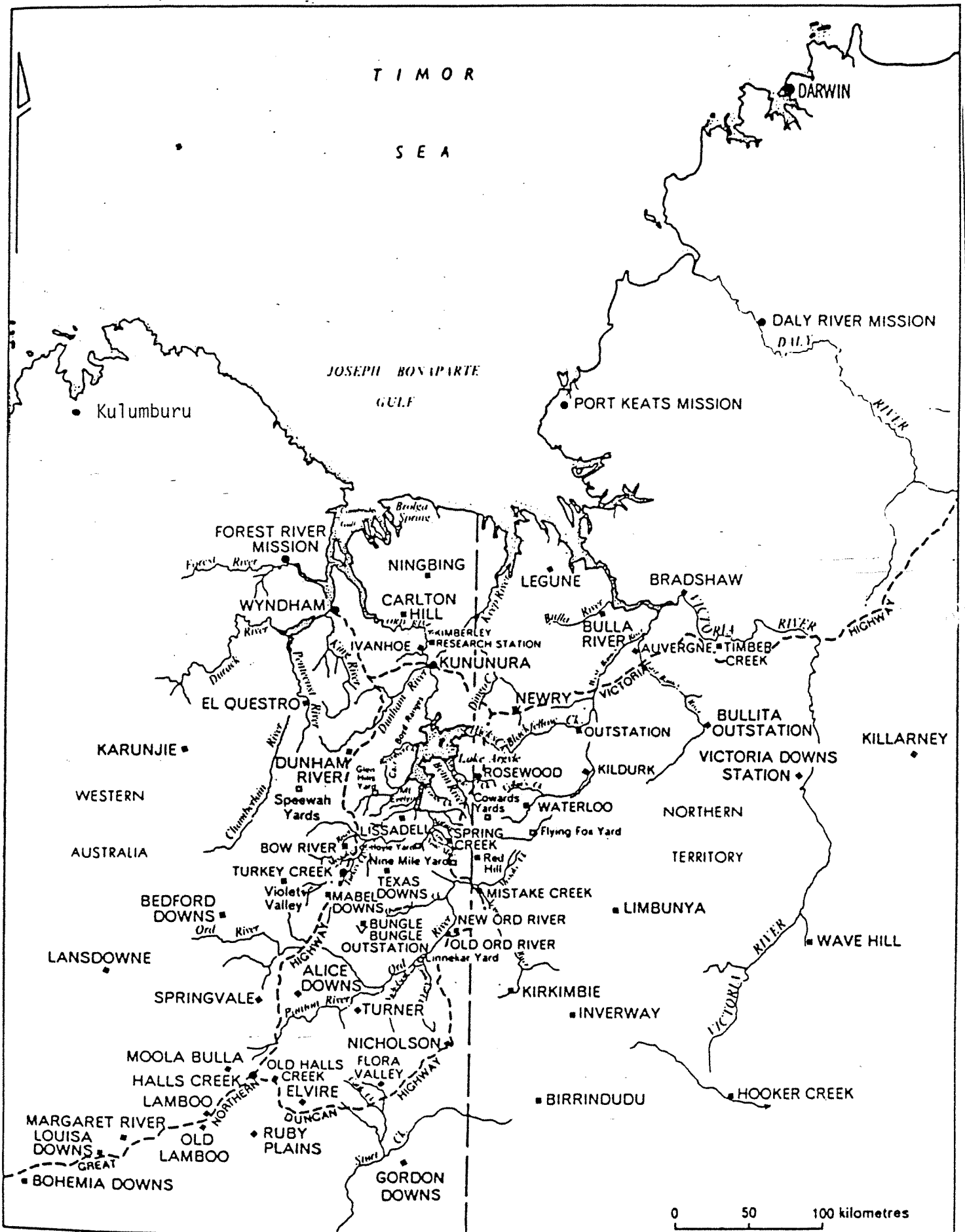
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The East Kimberley region today.

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

This document is compiled as part of the East Kimberley Impact Assessment Project. An outline and description of the project has been produced (CRES 1985). One of the aims of the project listed in that document was the compilation of a comprehensive profile of the contemporary social environment of the East Kimberley region utilising both existing information sources and limited fieldwork. This document attempts to briefly describe the major components of the region's social environment, and to identify key information and data sources for each of those components. The document is intended as a research tool, and not as a finished or complete piece of research. Its aim is to facilitate further research. It will be followed by a much fuller and detailed bibliography of the region which is currently in preparation.

The starting point for this research guide is the research agenda attached to the East Kimberley project outline (CRES 1985). Set out below are the topics taken from the research agenda which are addressed in this document:

A. The Region

- . General description
- . Natural features
- . Aboriginal society
- . History of white settlement

B. Contemporary Economic Change

- . Renewable resources
- . The pastoral industry
- . Mining
- . Tourism
- . Public investment and administrative expenditure

A. THE REGION

The project outline (CRES 1985) has a section which describes the origins of the project. It was decided by the committee co-ordinating the project that the study should address a number of developments occurring within the East Kimberley region. This raises the specific question: how is the East Kimberley defined?

There are any number of potential answers to this question, and accordingly the project has adopted a broad and flexible approach. Attempts to evaluate social impacts within a general region must take account of, *inter alia*:

- (i) the geophysical features of the region;
- (ii) the social groupings within the region;
- (iii) the potential data sources relating to the region;
- (iv) the political units relating to the region.

Consequently, the following boundaries are adopted by the project to determine or define the East Kimberley. In the east, the Victoria River serves as a convenient geographical boundary, as does the coastline to the north. In the west, the line running roughly from Kalumburu in the north, through Louisa Downs in the south is an arbitrary and convenient boundary. In the south, the region is bounded by the Great Sandy Desert and the communities of Lake Gregory and Balgo. Thus the project is focussed on the land region bounded by longitudes 126°45' and 131°15' and latitudes 14°30' and 21°00'.

Notwithstanding the geographical focus of the project, the objective of assessing the social impact of various public and private policies means that not all research and analysis related to the project will retain this focus since policy formulation and implementation generally take place within much more extensive geographical contexts. The region has been deliberately defined to include the adjacent area in the Northern Territory since the existence of the border has implications for policy-making and social impact assessment.

Geography of the Region: General and Natural Features

General descriptions of the region can be found in Maze (1945), Macdonald Holmes (1963: Ch.17), and Kerr (1975). The geology of the region is described in Hardman (1985), Blatchford (1927) and more recently Plumb (1968) and Dow and Gemuts (1969). The soils and landforms of the region are described in Stewart *et al* (1970). The Argyle Diamond Project Draft ERMP (Dames and Moore 1982) provides a great deal of data on the physical environment of the project area, while Williams *et al.* (1985) provides a general description of soils and climate in north-west Australia generally.

The vegetation and flora of the region are described in Stewart *et al.* (1970), Beard (1981), and in broad terms by Andrew *et al* (1985). The Western Australia Museum has published a biological survey of the major national park in the region, the Drysdale River National Park edited by Kabay and Burbidge (1977).

The ethnobotany of the Kulumburu area has been explored by Crawford (1982), and that of the Bungle Bungles by Scarlett (1984) and Rose (1984).

Aboriginal Society

The most important ethnographic work relating to the region is undoubtedly Phyllis Kaberry's *Aboriginal Woman: Sacred and Profane* (1939). Based on fieldwork carried out in the region during the 1930's, this work provided the first extensive evidence of the importance and influence of Aboriginal women in both the social and ritual realms. Kaberry also published a number of articles in the journals *Oceania* and *Mankind* in the period 1935 to 1939. Elkin also published papers on social organisation (1932) and totemism (1933) in north-western Australia which make specific reference to East Kimberley tribes. Other more descriptive accounts of early post-contact Aboriginal society in the region include Bassett-Smith (1893), Basedow (1918) and Stuart (1923). Early linguistic research was undertaken by Capell (1939, 1940)

History of European Settlement

The region was first settled by Europeans as a result of the geographical expansion of the pastoral industry from the east, after Gregory in 1856 and the Forrest brothers in 1879 and 1883 had surveyed the region (Gregory, 1884; Forrest, 1880, 1883). The first cattle were overlanded to Ord River Station in 1884, by Buchanan (Buchanan, 1933) and by the following year the Duracks and other associates had placed stock on Argyle, Rosewood and Lissadell. In 1885, gold was discovered at Halls Creek, which led to a substantial influx of miners and prospectors, and to the establishment of the port of Wyndham (Durack, M.P., 1933; Hill, 1951: Ch.13).

Useful accounts of the settlement history of the region are to be found in Durack, M., (1932), Biskup (1973), Broughton (1965), and the introduction of Bruce Shaw's *My Country of the Pelican Dreaming* (1981). Shaw's life history work, particularly the two major works on Grant Ngabidj (1981) and Jack Sullivan (1983a), provide an unparalleled insight into the history of European settlement of the region through Aboriginal eyes. Similarly, Mary Durack's two major books on the history of her family, *Kings in Grass Castles* (1959) and *Sons in the Saddle* (1983) provide a detailed account of the day-to-day motivations and objectives of the settlers.

Perhaps the crucial theme exposed by the process of settlement was the conflict between Aboriginal society and the settlers. Descriptions of conflict and resistance are prominent in all the references cited above. The reports of the Roth (1905) and Wood (1927) Royal Commissions provide contemporary accounts and analyses of the violence which permeated Aboriginal-settler relations. Shaw's article on the Aboriginal 'bushranger' Major (1983b) is a vivid account of one of the forms Aboriginal resistance took. In a more contemporary setting, Willis (1980) has analysed the characteristics of the structural conflict between Aboriginal society and European society in his monograph *Patrons and Riders*.

The other major theme which interfuses the history of white settlement is the concept of northern development, based initially on the

idea that the very land itself was hostile, and must be subjugated and conquered. In the past a number of development schemes for the region have been suggested, but not implemented including subdivision of pastoral leases and the building of a railway to Wyndham (Clune 1947: 228) and the establishment of a Jewish homeland in the region (Steinberg 1948; Matsford, 1973/74).

The major development project which has been initiated was the Ord River Irrigation Project. This will be discussed below in the section dealing with contemporary change.

CONTEMPORARY ECONOMIC CHANGE

Renewable Resources

Theoretically, this topic would include agricultural and pastoral activity within the region. The exploitation of these resources will be dealt with below.

The exploitation of the renewable resources of land, river and sea was, pre-contact, the basis of the Aboriginal economy. There appears to have been no research undertaken which attempts to quantify resource utilisation and renewal rates prior to European settlement, though Kaberry (1935, 1938) and Elkin (1933) do discuss the existence of increase ceremonies and rituals which in the Aboriginal cosmology were required to ensure resource renewal.

Nor has there been any research in the East Kimberley directed toward assessing the contemporary importance of hunting and gathering in the region. Altman (1982) and Palmer (1982) have undertaken case studies in Arnhem Land and the Pilbara respectively which bear on this question. Nor is there any published data available on the impact of first, the introduction of cattle, and second, the concomitant range and soil degradation of resource stocks of soils, pastures, and consequently of the wildlife and edible flora in the region. Newsome (1980) suggests that the relationships are dynamic, but that eventually the introduction of ruminant herbivores leads to a negative impact on populations of marsupial herbivores. The question of self-sufficient resource utilisation is of

increasing relevance due to the consolidation of the outstation movement in the region in recent years.

The Pastoral Industry

From the very start, European settlement of the region has been based on the utilisation of the pastoral resource. See the references in the section on the history of European settlement above.

Bolton (1954) outlines the early history of the industry in the region. The maintenance of leasehold land tenure has meant that there has always been significant Government involvement and oversight of the industry, with Royal Commissions held in 1928 and 1940, and more recently, Government Inquiries into 'The Present and Future Pastoral Industry of WA' (Jennings, 1979) and the 'Kimberley Pastoral Industry Inquiry' (1985).

Kelly made a significant critical contribution to the literature on the pastoral industry in the north in two books, *The Struggle for the North* (1966) and *Beef in Northern Australia* (1971). Both have substantial discussions of the East Kimberley, the primary argument being that there has been a failure of governments to properly administer the pastoral resource, particularly in relation to land unit size and range degradation. Kelly saw the dominance of the industry by absentee owners as a prime factor in the problems facing the industry. The earlier book, in a far-sighted and progressive chapter, argues that the pastoral industry would be best served in terms of its Aboriginal labour force by adopting policies based on social justice and human dignity, and cites Rosewood Station in the East Kimberley as a model for others.

In the period since Kelly wrote, there has been an appreciable increase in the technical literature relating to pastoralism in the region; Hacker (1982) and Winter *et al.* (1985), provide useful introductions to those research results. The questions of land tenure, optimal land unit size, and the relevance of absentee-ownership have been discussed in a number of contributions by Young (1979, 1981).

Finally, there has grown up an extensive literature on degradation of the pastoral resource throughout the Kimberley. Fitzgerald (1968) and

Ryan (1981) discuss degradation problems relating to the Ord River Regeneration Project, as does the Bungle Bungle Working Group (1984: 49-55).

There appears to be no published data on the extent of rangeland degradation in the East Kimberley outside the Regeneration Reserve, although comments in the Kimberley Pastoral Industry Report (1985), and Dames and Moore (1982: 109-111) indicate that a serious problem exists across broad areas of the East Kimberley.

Agriculture

The focus of agricultural activity in the region is undoubtedly the Ord River Irrigation Project. Key references include Patterson (1964), Davidson (1965), Graham-Taylor (1982) and Department of National Resources (1976). Robertson and Chapman (1985) review the contribution of research to agricultural development in the context of the irrigation scheme. A joint Commonwealth-State Review of the scheme (Young 1979: 89) in 1979 established that the net public expenditure of \$85 million had been of no benefit to the nation in terms of contribution to the net increase in national output. This conclusion effectively sealed the fate of the scheme, and it is now widely recognised to have been unsuccessful in terms of the stated aims and objectives of developing the region.

A number of specific crops have been tried in the region: grain sorghum for use in feed-lot beef production (Anderson *et al.*, 1973), cotton and other fibre crops (Wood and Hearn, 1985), rice (Chapman *et al.*, 1985) and finally sugar cane (Cox and Chapman, 1985). None of these crops has proved suitable for a combination of ecological and economic reasons. The best hope for agriculture in the region may lie in small-scale, intensive horticulture of crops such as bananas, mango, and melon (Scholefield and Blackburn, 1985).

Mining

The mineral resources of the region are substantial, and include the Sorby Hills silver, lead, zinc deposit north-east of Kununurra, the largely unexplored oil and gas potential of the Bonaparte Basin under the

continental shelf to the north, the Sally Malay nickel deposit south west of Turkey Creek, and the Argyle diamond deposit north-east of Turkey Creek (Office of Regional Development and North-west, 1984). As well, there are a number of smaller gold and copper deposits close to Halls Creek. Apart from Argyle, the development of these deposits appears some years off.

The Argyle diamond mine is the largest resource development project in the region. There is an extensive literature on a range of topics related to the mine. Key references include Dames and Moore's (1982) Environmental Review and Management Program, and Argyle Diamond Mine Joint Venture *Argyle Project Briefing* (1984), for their description of the project, and its place in the world diamond industry. Madigan (1983) and Jones (1984) provide insights into the approaches adopted by the joint venturers to the establishment of the project. Thompson (1983) analyses the relationship between Argyle Diamond Mines and the De Beers organisation which effectively controls the world diamond market. Dillon (1984) analyses the processes of public policy-making arising out of the discovery and establishment of the diamond mine, particularly in relation to foreign investment control, marketing and social impact policies. There has been substantial research into the relationship between ADM and local Aboriginal communities and particularly the establishment and operation of ADM's 'good neighbour policy'; Christensen (1983), Langton (1983) and Cousins and Nieuwenhuysen (1984) are perhaps the most important, though this issue continues to be the subject of study.

Tourism

There appears to be little research undertaken in relation to the costs and benefits of tourism in the region outside of Government sponsored studies. The Western Australia Department of Tourism produced in 1981 a document entitled, *Kimberley Regional Tourism Survey 1981*, and the following year a survey of caravan park requirements in the north-west generally (Western Australia Department of Tourism 1982).

In early 1984, the Western Australia Department of Tourism was replaced by the Western Australia Tourism Commission. The Commission produces regular statistics on domestic and international tourism within

Western Australia (Western Australia Tourism Commission 1984) (Western Australia Department of Tourism, 1983).

The Government is currently preparing Regional Tourism plans for each region in the State. The relationship between Aboriginal society and tourism has not been explored as yet in relation to the East Kimberley, although it is understood a number of researchers are planning research projects. Vinnicombe (1985) does discuss this relationship, particularly in relation to the management of sites of cultural significance, in Western Australia generally. The Report of the Bungle Bungle Working Group (1984) does discuss the role of tourism in demanding particular services and access rights in a future Bungle Bungle National Park.

The Role of the Public Sector in the Region

The public sector has a major role in the provision of social and economic infrastructure in the region. The Department of Regional Development and the North-West undertakes a major co-ordinating role amongst other significant Government Departments and as an interface between the public and private sector. Heatley (1982) has analysed the history and role of this Department's involvement in regional development and policy-making, and concluded that central control is still a reality, notwithstanding claims to the contrary.

The major State Government Departments involved in the region are Agriculture, Public Works, Main Roads, Health and Education and Community Services. The Federal government is represented by Social Security, Aboriginal Affairs and the Aboriginal Development Commission. Each of these agencies produce annual reports, and occasional publications, but generally with a broader focus than the East Kimberley.

The larger infrastructure investments generally have a number of published descriptions and assessments. See the sections on agriculture and mining for publications relating to the Ord Project and the Argyle diamond mine. Meagher and Le Provost (1980) discuss the proposed hydro-electric generator on the Ord dam. There appears to have been no general assessment of the role and importance of the public sector in the region published to date. The 1979 Ord River Irrigation Area Review (Young 1979)

and the Argyle ERMP (Dames and Moore 1982) do provide some data on public sector involvement in the regional economy.

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