

The wonders of the Kimberley

A glimpse at its unique environment – ‘The Boab – a special tree’

(by Brian Kane)



This new column puts the Kimberley environment under the spotlight and where better to start than with the symbol of this region – the Boab tree. Can you imagine the stories that the Derby Boab Prison could tell us? Tales of Aboriginal people living off the land and collecting its nuts for food. The comings and goings of countless wet seasons and cyclones. The incarceration of Aboriginal prisoners in its hollowed interior. The spectacle of herds of cattle drinking from the nearby Myall’s bore trough. But why does this special tree hold so much intrigue for us? The bush tucker man, Les Hiddins, told the Aboriginal legend of the Boab tree in his television program on the Kimberley. He related how the Boab was the ‘showiest’ tree in the Kimberley in ancient times but the ‘dreamtime spirits fixed that right up by reefing it out of the ground and shoving it in upside down so what we see today are really the roots’.



It's hard to imagine how old these trees really are – upwards of 600 years and far beyond. Allan Cunningham, a naturalist, and his crew carved the name of their ship 'HMC Mermaid 1820' into a Boab tree in the North Kimberley and this is still plainly visible today.

Perhaps the 'prison tree' even witnessed in 1890 the passing of the Trappist Fr. Ambrose Junny, John Cornelius Daly the former policeman turned Trappist brother and their Aboriginal guide, making their way by a bullock wagon loaded with supplies to start the mission at Beagle Bay. There was no track, so axes, mattocks and shovels were used and the journey of 120 miles took them three weeks.

Today as we travel on our sealed highways we often marvel at the various shapes of the stately Boab tree but try to take some time to look at a Boab when it flowers. It is one of the beauties of God's creation with its rolled back petals, fine fur on the outer surface and the transference of pollen by the Hawk Moth.. But the best time to view this phenomenon is at night because this is when the flowers bloom and they only last but a single day.

Further information: BK's Kimberley nature web site:

<http://www.stmarysbroome.wa.edu.au/home/nature/aaopen.html>