

The wonders of the Kimberley

A glimpse at its unique environment – ‘In the beginning ...’

(by Brian Kane)



It is difficult enough for us to propel our minds back 3000 years BC to the time of the pyramids in Egypt let alone millions of years ago to when the Kimberley was formed. On reflection, our lifetime on earth would hardly represent a dot on this kind of scale. Geologists using a radiometric dating technique agree that our earth is approximately 4,600 million years old. The Kimberley emerged 1,900 million years ago from a continental plate of sand and silt in a shallow sea surrounded by mountain belts. The drifting plate eventually collided with Northern Australia producing upheavals of molten rock and lava which spread out across the land. Over time, weathering produced sediment which covered the valleys and rivers carved out gorges and waterfalls through sandstone and volcanic rocks. In the western Kimberley, the Lennard and Fitzroy Rivers cut their way through the limestone of the Napier Range forming Windjana and Geikie Gorges. These gorges contain the ancient Devonian ocean reef which still extends 50-100m above the plain today. It is hard to imagine that over 600 hundred million years ago ice covered most of Australia and the evidence of this can be clearly seen. The water eventually dissolved the limestone, forming caves like Tunnel Creek. In Purnululu (Kija word meaning sandstone) National Park the Bungle Bungle range was formed 375 million years ago of sandstone, pebbles and boulders. Weathering eventually produced the beehive domes with horizontal orange and black stripes. The name ‘Bungle Bungle’ is thought to be a corruption of the Aboriginal name for the area or linked to ‘bundle bundle’ grass. This area was well known to the Aboriginal people who used its plant and animal life which were abundant each wet season. Purnululu was relatively unknown to the outside world until it was declared a National Park in 1987 and later was given world heritage listing in 2003 both for its geological features and for its rich Aboriginal culture spanning over 20 000 years. Today the members of the Warmun Aboriginal community offer a valuable contribution in their knowledge and understanding of this unique environment.



Cathedral Gorge – Purnululu National Park (photo BK)

Further information: BK's Kimberley nature web site:

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