

Ken Mulvaney

**Management Strategies and the
Component of Indigenous Sacred Places:
The Dreaming and Aboriginal Involvement in Site
Management within Northern Territory
National Parks, Australia**

The obvious absence of these features [settlements and political structure] gives the invader (settler, administrative officer, missionary) the impression that the natives are almost cultureless and that whatever he does can interfere but little with them (Elkin 1951, 165).

This time white-European must come to Aborigine, listen Aborigine and understand it. Understand that culture, secret, what dreaming. No-matter we dead but that law you got to keep it.... And you can't change it no-matter anyone, no-matter rich man whatever, no-matter is king, whatever king, but that law e can't break (Neidjie 1989, 78-80).

The government manages national parks in the Northern Territory of Australia primarily for the enjoyment of visitors. Natural beauty, biodiversity, and cultural heritage are seen as assets that can be exploited to bring tourists with their money into the region. For Aboriginal people, with their traditional country covered by national parks, there are unique issues. To the colonising population, the archaeology of Australia provides an interesting record of human adaptation and development within a hunter-gatherer society over a very long period (ca. 40,000-60,000 years). The rock art provides a spectacular vision of another culture. However, for the indigenous people, these same sites may form part of their sacred and ceremonial life. National park development strategies and the desire to impress the tourist are often in conflict with traditional appropriateness for places of religious significance.

Within the Northern Territory (see Figure 1), particular legislation exists that is intended to provide for the protection of such places and to recognise the rights of the indigenous people in the decision-making process; certain sacred sites are inappropriate for public access. However, for other places, the involvement of the Aboriginal custodians not only prevents conflict but also enhances the public interpretation and enjoy-

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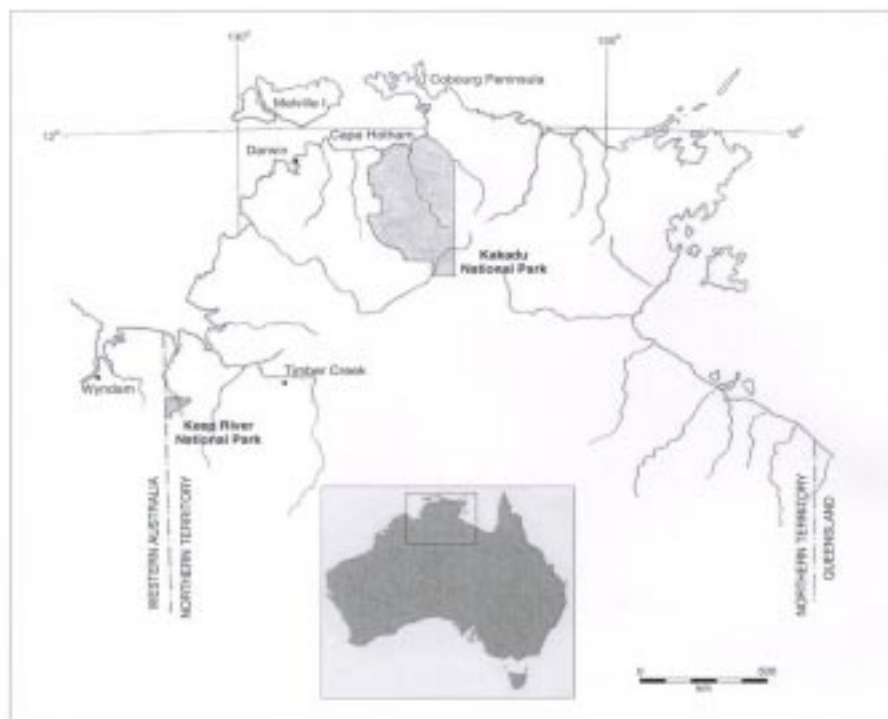


Figure 1. Map of the Northern Territory showing locations mentioned in the text.

ment derived from the site. Trends in the Northern Territory of Australia are toward the recognition of spiritual association and for the involvement of the indigenous people in the management and presentation of archaeological sites.

Cultural and political differences between Aboriginals and park managers has in the past resulted in the sometimes unintentional desecration of sacred sites, a situation of non-cooperation, and, at times, outright confrontation. This paper presents a background to the social and cultural

circumstance of Aboriginal sacred sites, focusing on the management and public development of these places by the national parks authorities within the Northern Territory.

Historical Background

To understand the particular cultural circumstance of the indigenous people of this part of Australia, one must look at the colonial history of the region. Unlike the southeastern portion of Australia, the north is sparsely populated. The first British attempt at settlement was that of Fort

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Dundas on Melville Island (1824-8). Established as a military and trading settlement, it was no more than an outpost of the New South Wales government centred at Sydney some 4,600 km sailing distance away. Prior to the permanent settlement of Darwin (Palmerston) in 1869, there were several other unsuccessful colonies established on the north coast (Powell 1982). Like Fort Dundas, they were short lived. Both Fort Wellington (1827-9) and Victoria Settlement (1838-49) were situated on the Coburg Peninsula. The fourth settlement was that of Escape Cliffs (1864-6) on Cape Hotham.

The influences on the Aboriginal people in the vicinity of these nineteenth-century settlements was limited and of no more effect than that of the Macassan trepang fleets that annually visited the north coast over the last few centuries (Macknight 1976). Exotic items entered the ceremonial exchange system and there is some linguistic evidence for the adoption of words, but little else (Mitchell 1995). It is possible that contact with other cultures occurred by way of landfalls prior to the documented exploration and mapping voyages under the Dutch (in the early to mid-seventeenth century) and British (from the late seventeenth century). Portuguese and Spanish seafarers may have reached the Australian coast prior to the seventeenth century. Certainly they were present in the islands to the north. It is also

possible that Chinese voyages came to the shores of Australia many centuries before the Europeans, although there is only circumstantial evidence for this (Powell 1982).

In any event, it was not until the mid-nineteenth century that the interior of the Northern Territory was explored (Stokes 1839; Leichhardt 1844-5; Gregory 1855-6; Stuart 1860-2; Giles 1872-4; Gosse 1873; Favenc 1878-9; Forrest 1879-80). The survey of the route and subsequent construction of the Overland Telegraph line (1862-72) between Adelaide in the south and Darwin did much to open up the inland, each of the telegraph stations becoming outposts of white settlement. Some, like Alice Springs and Tennant Creek, resulted in the development of population centres that continue to this day. Favourable reports of the existence of extensive pastoral lands as reported by a number of the exploration parties hastened the opening up of the Northern Territory. These reports lead to the establishment of cattle enterprises over much of the Northern Territory and east Kimberley region of Western Australia from the 1880s. Such towns as Wyndham (founded 1886) in the east Kimberley were established to support the fledgling cattle enterprises. Others, such as Timber Creek (1897) with its police station, were established to lend support and protection to a stores depot that had been operating since the early 1890s

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supplying the newly created pastoral stations. It was a rough and ready time: contact with the indigenous Australians was limited and often came at the end of a gun (Willshire 1896).

Within the Northern Territory, there was not the major disruption to social cohesion or the organised removal of people from land as had occurred in other parts of Australia. Of significance is that the South Australian government, in the initial development of the Northern Territory through the Northern Territory Crown Lands Act (SA) of 1890, provided to the indigenous people compensation, land reserves, and the right to hunt and otherwise utilise the land taken up for pastoral activities. By this it was hoped that the injustices and devastation to the Aboriginal people that occurred in the eastern states of Australia would not manifest itself. This is not to say that the indigenous inhabitants experienced no adverse effects from European settlement (Elkin 1951). Death occurred both as a result of punitive expeditions against them following livestock spearing and because they contracted introduced diseases. People, especially males, were removed from their communities on murder or livestock stealing charges, and taken as labour in the pearling, pastoral, and buffalo hide industries. In addition, the establishment of cattle stations not only changed people's domestic patterns

though employment and food rations, but also changed the ecosystem, with the associated loss in availability of traditionally utilised fauna and flora.

Nevertheless, it was the particular European settlement and historic land use patterns of the Northern Territory that has ensured the continuity of Aboriginal laws, customs, and practises. Over much of the Northern Territory encounters with other cultures is a relatively recent event, and, until late in the nineteenth century, was spatially limited and short-term. In fact, today there remain a few people who recall their first encounters with white people, and for many the initial cross-cultural contact is only one or two generations removed. The sparse European settlements and the pastoral practises of the cattle industry have ensured that people remain on or close to their traditional lands.

Uniquely to the Northern Territory, almost 50% of the area is under direct administrative control of Aboriginal communities. The Aboriginal Land Rights (NT) Act of 1976 provides for the granting of land for the benefit of Aboriginals and affords control of mining interests and other developments on the granted Aboriginal Land. In addition, provisions within the Crown Lands Ordinance (No. 3) (NT) section 24(2) of 1978 continue to guarantee the rights of Aboriginals to enter and be on leased land and to hunt and forage for food

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or ceremonial purposes.

Aboriginal Country

Unlike the popular misconception of the Australian Aboriginal as a nomadic primitive, presence on the land was not a truly random event, unconnected to economic, cultural, or religious life. True, Australian Aboriginal society was a hunter-gatherer culture, utilising stone, bone, and wood implements, and, in the main, did not establish permanent settlements (Hallam 1975; Oconnor 1987; Plomley 1966; Clarke 1994). However, people clearly identify with particular tracts of country, associate with certain features and places within the landscape, and hold to a notion of inheritance of cultural knowledge and estates. As Justice Lee commented, "Aboriginal inhabitants were distributed throughout significant areas in organised communities with elaborate and obligatory laws and customs, each having a defined area of land recognised by other groups as the homeland of the respective communities used by them for social, ritual and economic purposes" (1998, 43).

Aboriginal people, through kinship, inherit "ownership" to country for which they hold particular rights, above other persons, to access and utilise resources. Attached to those rights are the responsibilities to maintain (physically and spiritually) and protect Dreaming sites and other

places of cultural significance. Certain areas and features in the landscape are held to have a sacred nature which is associated with the ascribed spiritual forces. The term "sacred sites" has come into common usage to identify these localities. Maddock (1974, 27) observed that "Aborigines regard land as a religious phenomenon. The earth owes its topography to the acts of world-creative powers who appeared mysteriously and moved about on the surface before sinking into the ground or the water or rising into the sky, leaving a formed and populated world behind them.... The land as a whole is nameless, but the many spots at which powers acted and gave form (for example crags, waterholes, caves) are named and are religiously significant as evidence of the Dreaming." For Aboriginal Australians, the landscape is viewed as an amalgam of events acted out on the topography. The acquisition of knowledge of this metaphysical rationale of the landscape is attained, in part, through participation in ceremonies. Throughout life, a person continues to gain ritual knowledge which is placed in a topographic perspective that validates both the mythology and the bond between the person, the Dreaming, and the land.

Within Northern Territory Aboriginal society, responsibilities for the protection of Dreaming places (sacred sites) is an integral part of these peoples' lives. As Elkin (1951, 164)

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observed many years ago, "imitation for the native is ... of the traditional, of the cultural, of the ways of the cult-heroes or 'Dreamings' as the Australian Aborigines call these." This is manifest in the customs and practises of these communities. For them, maintenance of the country and ritual performances are part of the linked association of the spiritual and tangible world. For aboriginal people, there is the coexistence of two domains: one of the physical world inhabited by humans and animals, the other occupied by the Dreaming figures, ancestors, and other spirits. Physical damage to places or incorrect ritual performances, even inadvertent actions, can result in sickness or death to individuals and groups responsible under Aboriginal tradition for the site or Dreaming concerned.

Sacred Site Protection

Protection of cultural heritage is enshrined in several laws of the Northern Territory. The Northern Territory Aboriginal Sacred Sites Act of 1989 establishes a procedure for the protection and registration of places of current cultural significance (sacred sites). In addition, the act provides for conditions of entry into such places and establishes a procedure for the avoidance of such places in the development and land use. The Heritage Conservation Act of 1991 provides a system for the identification, assessment, recording,

conservation, and protection of places and objects of prehistoric, protohistoric, historical, social, aesthetic, or scientific value.

In the majority of instances, sacred sites comprise unmodified natural features that may include mountain ranges, waterways, or even isolated single trees and rocks. Other than by reference to the Aboriginal custodians (see Figure 2), there is no way of identifying the location and extent or the nature of significance of such places. However, in regard to those places associated with the prehistoric occupation of the Northern Territory, these archaeological places are evident by the presence of cultural material or by way of scientific investigations. Nevertheless, blanket protection is provided for both sacred sites and archaeological places within the Northern Territory, regardless of whether or not they have been "declared," "registered," or otherwise brought to official attention.

In addition to the problem of the physical setting of a sacred site, statutory rights are conferred upon Aboriginal custodians. In relation to areas that fall within the definition of a sacred site, rights under the Northern Territory Aboriginal Sacred Sites Act of 1989 include:

- The right of access to sacred sites in accordance with Aboriginal tradition, regardless of the underlying land tenure (s. 46) (see Figure 3);

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Figure 2. Carlton George, a Mirriuwung man, standing against his own hand stencil, produced when he was a small boy camping at the Nganalum sacred site, Keep River National Park.

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- The right to authorise other people (both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal) to cross any land, whether it be public or private, for the purposes of entering a sacred site (s. 47-4);
- The right to refuse permission for persons to enter or remain on a sacred site (s. 43); and
- The right to determine the nature and extent of works (if any) that may be undertaken on or in the vicinity of a sacred site (s. 20).

It is also an offence for a person to obstruct an Aboriginal custodian from exercising these rights or for an individual or company to knowingly desecrate or otherwise carry out works within a sacred site area. The structure of the 1989 act accommodates the particular relationship indigenous inhabitants of the Northern Territory have with land, as well as the link between the social, cultural, and religious spheres attached to features within the landscape. Legislative framework and administrative procedures that protect sacred sites and archaeological places specifically allow for the involvement of Aboriginal custodians and the traditional owners of country regardless of the underlying land tenure. This situation is particularly pertinent in the management approaches to cultural heritage within national parks.

National Park Case Studies

Two examples of cross-cultural interaction and site management in national parks within the Northern Territory are Kakadu National Park, a World Heritage Site (declared October 1981, consolidated December 1992) administered by the Commonwealth government's Parks Australia, and Keep River National Park, controlled by the Northern Territory Parks and Wildlife Commission.

The background to Kakadu National Park is that there had been a long-standing interest in the establishment of a national park in the northern part of the territory. Following on from the Alligator Rivers Region environment fact-finding study of 1972-3, and the Ranger Uranium environmental inquiry of 1977, a park was established. Stage 1 of Kakadu National Park was proclaimed in 1979, encompassing an area of 6,144 sq km. Kakadu Stage 2, an additional area of 6,929 sq km, was proclaimed in 1984. Stage 3, which encompassed the Goodparla and Gimbat pastoral leases, was added in 1987, providing a total area of 18,960 sq km.

The National Parks and Wildlife Conservation Act of 1975, subsection 11-8, identifies the following objectives for the park:

- Encouragement and regulation of the appropriate use, appreciation, and enjoyment of the park by the public;

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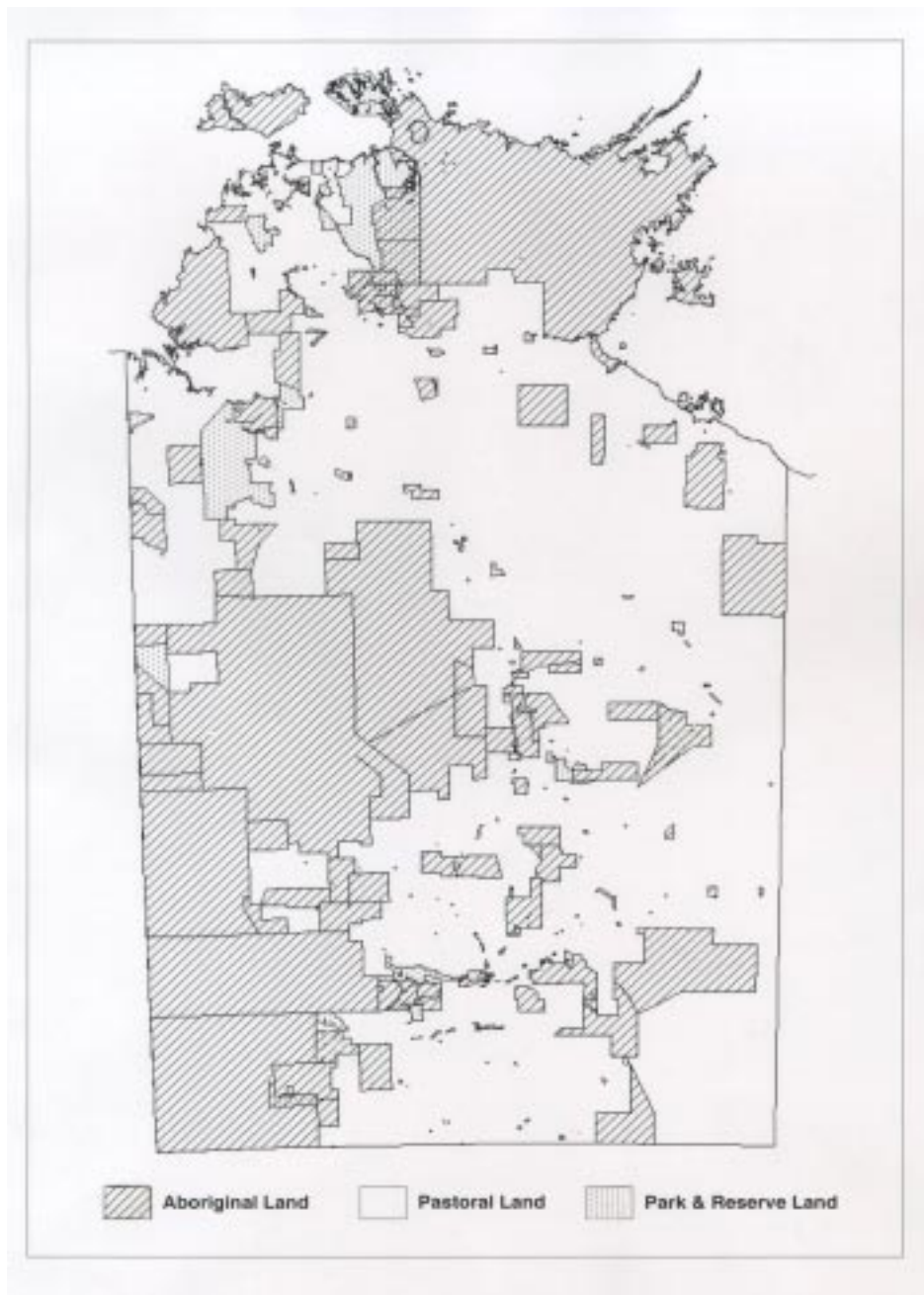


Figure 3. Map showing the main land tenure of the Northern Territory.

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- Recognition of the interests of the traditional aboriginal owners and of other Aborigines; and
- Preservation of the park in its natural condition and the protection of its special features.

Aboriginal communities, held under provisions of the Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act of 1976, own much of the Kakadu Park area. It is leased back to the Commonwealth Government for the purpose of maintaining a national park. There are some ten Aboriginal residential settlements existing within the park, and several indigenous-owned enterprises assist these as well as operate tourist ventures (Press et al. 1995, 6). A majority of Aborigines are on the board of management, with other traditional owners of the park employed as rangers. Management of the park is described as a community-based conservation project where the Aboriginal owners are given the opportunity to participate fully (Press et al. 1995, 239). Certainly the evidence is there to indicate that a cooperative and productive relationship in regard to site management issues has prevailed.

Keep River National Park, located on the Western Australia border, was established in 1979 by way of transfer of land from the existing Newry pastoral lease. An additional area was surrendered to the Territory in 1987, providing a total park area of 293 sq km. Although a relatively

small area, it nonetheless includes diverse and spectacular landforms. Management of these lands is currently vested by way of the Territory Parks and Wildlife Conservation Act (NT) of 1994. Of relevance here is that there have been two plans of management drawn up, by one in 1982 and the second in 1991. Specific reference to Aboriginal rights and interests is contained within these documents. They acknowledge the particular role of Aborigines in the management and protection of sites of spiritual and cultural significance. However, in practice, Aboriginal involvement has come at a late stage in planning and often at the insistence of the indigenous custodians. Very recently (24 November 1998) a federal court finding held that native title exists over Keep River National Park, in essence recognising that Aboriginal land interests in the area have remained intact since prior to the Crown claiming sovereignty (as part of the colony of New South Wales in 1825). It is too early to assess what, if any, effect this will have on the management of the park.

Since the park's inception, five community living areas have been established in or adjacent to the park. The park management raised much opposition to these settlements, with attempts made to restrict traditional practises such as hunting and foraging and burning of country. Although a board of management is

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required under provisions of the park, it rarely convenes. There is only one Aboriginal representative on this body, a person who was chosen not by the Aboriginal people but appointed by the park management. In essence, the planning and management of Keep River have been without Aboriginal input. The Northern Territory Aboriginal Sacred Sites Act of 1989 has been the only means that custodians have had to ensure restriction of inappropriate access or development of areas within the park.

Cross-cultural Acceptance

Despite the existence of legislation intended to protect Aboriginal cultural places, and national park management practices that mandate the involvement of indigenous people, conflicts do arise. Often it is the park managers' recognition of the spiritual value of places and acceptance of the Aboriginal wishes for them—or lack thereof—that determine the process and outcome. In specific cases, such as with mineral extraction, political intervention and public opinion impinge on or sway management practices.

Several park developments within Keep River have been proposed that have brought park managers in direct conflict with the Aboriginal custodians of sites within the area. In many of the instances, the park managers intended to open for public access a number of locations that contained

rock art. For the Aboriginal people, these locations were of important religious significance. In one case, the Nganalum site, not only are some of the images on the rock wall of ritual importance and belong to the Dreaming, they are also directly linked to known people. In addition, certain physical features at the place are associated with a Dreaming tradition. Construction of walkways, barriers, and interpretive signs were in place before Aboriginals were aware of the development. The Mirriuwung people view these as inappropriate works. Some adjustment to what was in place has been requested, but to date nothing has changed. Custodians also expressed their willingness to assist the park management in providing additional interpretive material, placing the site in a wider context of the mythological nature of the location and assisting with understandings of much of the rock art. It would seem that such cultural perceptions about a place could only be of interest and benefit to visiting tourists. Not only is the intransigence of the park managers at odds with accepted practise, their current action may be seen as desecration of a sacred site.

Misconceptions about the nature and reality of sites of sacred significance are often at the root of any development conflict. One letter to the editor of an Australian newspaper in regard to the Jabiluka mining proposal expressed not only a total lack

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of understanding of Aboriginal culture, but also the attitude that the Aboriginals, not the development, must give way. The writer remarked that "mining has to take place where the ore body is located, on the other hand Dreaming should be possible just about anywhere. It would be wrong and irresponsible for any government to forego the tangible benefits of a mining operation for the very dubious value of primitive superstitions" (*Canberra Times*, December 1998).

Unfortunately, attitudes like this are not that uncommon. Ten years ago, a similar debate was focused on Coronation Hill, a proposed gold mine in the southern area of Kakadu National Park. For the Jawoyn, the location is an important sacred site; for the government and mining com-

pany, it was a source of mineral wealth (Figure 4). In this case, the cultural values of the site and the natural heritage values of the area won out.

Conclusion

The non-Aboriginal settlement history and land use structure of the Northern Territory has ensured the maintenance of a vibrant and cohesive society in which attachment to land and the link between the spiritual and physical world are important elements.

Legal and administrative structures to protect indigenous heritage places have been developed that acknowledge the particular situation of traditional cultural integrity. The legislation empowers the Aboriginal owners to participate in the manage-



Figure 4. Cartoon appearing in the *Northern Territory News* during the time of the Coronation Hill confrontation, Kakadu National Park, amply parodying the divergent views. (August 15 1990, p. 8. Used by permission.)

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ment process and to determine what is appropriate. However, as evidenced with the two case studies, attitudes of park managers have a bearing on the process. It can either be harmonious and cooperative, or it can be acrimonious. Nevertheless, the prevailing situation is that places of sacred significance are protected under legislation and the Aboriginal custodians do have the controlling voice.

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Ken Mulvaney, Aboriginal Areas Protection Authority, P.O. Box 1890,
Darwin, Northern Territory 0801 Australia;
ken.mulvaney@DWNTII.AAPA.nt.gov.au

