Centre for Archaeological Science

Key Research Project

Change and continuity: chronology, archaeology and art in the North Kimberley, northwest Australia

The Kimberley is a defined geographic region covering ~420,000 km$^2$ in the northwest corner of Australia. Lying at the interface between Asia and Australia, its strategic position has enormous potential for tackling fundamental issues in Australian archaeology. At times of low sea level during the Pleistocene, water crossings of only ~100 km separated Timor, in island Southeast Asia, from the extended Kimberley coastline. It is, therefore, a likely beachhead for the initial peopling of Australia-Papua (Sahul), the age of which is of critical importance for debates about the timing, route and pace of modern human dispersal out of Africa - all big questions in world archaeology.

Little archaeological research has been undertaken in the Kimberley, despite this potential. However, what is known indicates a long, complex cultural sequence spanning major periods of climate change. The Kimberley also has a rock art body of World Heritage significance, which spans the last 42,000 years, and contains information on past environments, animals, human responses to climate change and material culture not represented in other types of archaeological evidence.
Kimberley rock painting styles include Wandjina creative beings (Photo: Mike Donaldson)

Chief Investigators for this 3-year Australian Research Council Linkage Project (2010–2013) are Mike Morwood, June Ross (University of New England) and Kira Westaway (Macquarie University). The project will include systematic site and resource surveys, as well as archaeological excavations to:

- Document when people first arrived in the Kimberley, and how they responded to subsequent changes in climate, local environments, in situ social processes and outside contacts.
- Deploy a range of numerical dating techniques to obtain a more robust regional chronology for changes in Aboriginal landuse, technology, economy and rock art.

Fieldwork commenced in June 2010 and included surveys, 4 excavations and detailed recording of 60 rock art sites.

**Industry Partners**
- Kandiwal Aboriginal Corporation
- WA Department of Environment and Conservation
- Kimberley Foundation Australia
- Heliwork and Slingair

**Key publications**