



KIMBERLEY
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Researching, preserving and promoting Kimberley rock art.

Newsletter

SUMMER 2012/13

World-leading archaeologist appointed Kimberley Rock Art Chair

A leading world expert in Indigenous archaeology has been appointed as the inaugural Kimberley Foundation Ian Potter Chair in Rock Art at The University of Western Australia.

Professor Peter Veth, a Fellow of the Australian Academy of the Humanities and the London Society of Antiquaries, will be based in UWA's Centre for Rock Art Research and Management (CRARM) and will work in collaboration with Traditional Owners and their representative bodies to help document date and study the Indigenous rock art of world significance in WA's remote Kimberley region.

In this role he will forge regional partnerships with Aboriginal communities, researchers and heritage managers on topics of community and scientific interest. Understanding these extraordinary art bodies in cultural, archaeological and environmental contexts will be paramount.

UWA Vice-Chancellor Professor Paul Johnson said Professor Veth's appointment placed UWA at the



centre of leading research into one of the world's most significant collections of Indigenous rock art, likely dating back to over 35,000 years.

The Chair is funded by a \$2 million gift from the Kimberley Foundation Australia (KFA). This amount consists of \$1.5 million contributed to KFA by The Ian Potter Foundation – one of Australia's major philanthropic foundations – and a \$500,000 contribution from global energy company INPEX, which is developing the Ichthys liquefied natural gas project in the Browse Basin, about 180km off the Kimberley coast.

UWA has provided matching funding of \$2 million and the State Government of Western Australia has provided an additional \$300,000 to help fund on-going research and teaching in Kimberley rock art.

KFA is represented on the Kimberley Chair Steering Group and will work closely with Professor Veth, reporting back to The Ian Potter Foundation and INPEX on Kimberley rock art research

projects and developments.

Professor Veth has worked extensively as a researcher, advisor and consultant on Indigenous rock art and heritage throughout the south-east Kimberley, Pilbara, Western Desert and Goldfields regions of Western Australia.

He carried out his Honours research on WA's Burrup Peninsula in 1981 and completed his Doctorate 1986-89 with the Martu people of the central Canning Stock Route region.

Last month in addition to being appointed the inaugural Winthrop Professor in Kimberley Rock Art, Peter was awarded an Australian Research Council Professorial Level 3 **Discovery Outstanding Researcher Award** for the Barrow Island Project. The research project is worth \$1.2M and is the largest grant of its kind ever awarded by the ARC.

Peter has recently completed a Global Rock Art Volume for Wiley-Blackwell with Dr Jo McDonald, the Director of the Centre for Rock Art Research Management at the University of WA.

Image (top): Peter Veth, Winthrop Professor Kimberley Foundation Ian Potter Chair in Rock Art.

Image (bottom left): Kimberley Traditional Owners (4), INPEX Senior Aboriginal Affairs Adviser Irene Stainton, Professor Peter Veth, INPEX Managing Director Seiya Ito and UWA Vice-Chancellor, Professor Paul Johnson.

Traditional Owners (left to right)

– Sylvester Mangolomara

– Greg Goonack, Chair Kandiwal Aboriginal Corporation

– Albert Peurmora

– Cathy Goonack, Chair Wunambal Gaambera Aboriginal Corporation

Image (bottom right): Leonard Collard, ARC Research Fellow Indigenous gives the Welcome to Country.





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The KFA-sponsored *Change and Continuity* project has completed its 3rd and final year in the NW Kimberley. Chief investigators Dr June Ross and Prof. Mike Morwood talk to science writer Leigh Dayton.

Rock art revelations

Scientific methods and Aboriginal knowledge are uncovering insights into the prehistoric settlement of northwest Australia.

It may be older than the 40,000 year-old paintings in Spain's El Castillo cave, the world's oldest well-dated rock art. It depicts human-like figures, a motif exceedingly rare in the rock art galleries of Europe, famed for their depictions of ice age animals, hand stencils and circles.

More remarkably, while Europe's painted caves reflect long-gone traditions and people, the rock art of West Australia's rugged, rust-coloured Kimberley reveals a complex thread running from the distant past to the present.

"The rock art, particularly the detailed figurative rock art, in the Kimberley provides unique

insights into Aboriginal cultures going back thousands and thousands of years," says archaeologist Mike Morwood of the University of Wollongong. "What we see as researchers is evidence of continuity. There is change, but there is also continuity of art, beliefs and land use over thousands of years."

According to Morwood, little research had been done in this archaeologically rich region until three years ago. That's when a project called *Change & Continuity: archaeology, chronology and art in the northwest Kimberley* began. He co-leads the project, along with University of New England rock art archaeologist June Ross and Macquarie University dating expert Kira Westaway.

The multi-disciplinary group includes researchers from three universities and six graduate students. The project has approval from the Senior Traditional Owners from Wunambal Gaambera Country and Aboriginal rangers have developed skills in all aspects of the project.

The goal is to blend modern research techniques with traditional knowledge, not only to enhance archaeological understanding of the past but to assist traditional owners manage their land and culture into the future. The work will provide essential information on the distribution, age and content of cultural heritage sites across the

vast region.

The 2012 field season wrapped up late July and data analysis is underway. "We hope to make a limited visit next year, tidying up and conveying the results to the local communities," Morwood says of the team which receives major funding from the Australian Research Council and the Kimberley Foundation Australia, along with additional in-kind support from the WA Department of Environment and Conservation, the Kandiwal Indigenous Community and aviation firm Slingair-Heliwork.

At the broadest level the *Change & Continuity* team seeks to document and date major turning points in the occupation of the Northwest Kimberley and answer fundamental questions. When did people first arrive? What impact did they have on local habitats and animals? How did they respond to climate changes?

"It will take generations to unravel it all," predicts Ross. But like her colleagues she says details are emerging by combining archaeological excavation and dating techniques with the scientific analysis of the styles, techniques, positioning and functions played by the rock art.

Australian researchers have played a major role, along with French investigators, in putting rock art study into the mainstream of archaeology. Researchers worldwide now incorporate rock art into their investigations of prehistoric cultures. According to Morwood, they recognise that if they ask "the right questions" the art provides insight into the minds of people, not reflected in conventional artefacts.

As Ross notes, there's a trove of rock art to interrogate in the Kimberley, from paintings and engravings to stone arrangements. "Where there's water there's rock art. The sheer volume and sheer

"It will take generations to unravel it all."

Dr June Ross.

Image (left): Dr June Ross delivers lecture at UWA on 15 November in Perth with Traditional Owners from Wunambal Gaambera Country in foreground.

Image (right): Prof Mike Morwood, left, and Dr June Ross at the site of a Gwion sash-period rock painting in WA.





Image:
Terrence Manga,
Uunguu Ranger,
Kalumburu recording
Gwion art.

variety is striking.” The team has recorded 210 rock art sites in detail and visited many others, mainly in the Lawley and Mitchell River catchments. “There must be hundreds of thousands of paintings in the region,” says Ross.

Imagine tall thin figures with tasseled belts, fancy headdresses and spears. Known originally as Bradshaws, after Joseph Bradshaw who reported them in 1891, these exquisite and highly detailed paintings are known now by their Aboriginal name, “Gwion”, and are an early regional style. The most recent works, unique to the Kimberley, come from the “Wanjina” period. Here, round white faces with large carbon black eyes and dark halos around their heads stare from the rock.

While it was argued by the late Kimberley rock art researcher Grahame Walsh that the two styles were so different, they must have been painted by people from different cultures, the new work shows otherwise.

“What we’re finding is the changes are gradual,” explains Ross. “We see shared attributes on many figures,” she says. As with other KFA-sponsored research, the transition

over time from one form to another becomes evident.

The team also sees artistic connections with the rock art of Arnhem Land to the northeast. And they’re confident information discovered during their excavation of seven rock shelter sites and three open sites near shelters will help establish how the people of the northwest Kimberley connected to those from the southern Kimberley. There, archaeologists have evidence of what may be a painted limestone slab dated to roughly 34,000–43,000 before present.

The critical task is to obtain more solid dates for the rock art and archaeological sites of the northwest Kimberley. To that end, tiny samples of ochre and other natural material – wasp nests, crusts and grains of carbon or sand – at the sites and above the art are being dated, using a variety of laboratory techniques.

So when were artists putting ochre on rock? So far, the evidence Westaway and her geochronologist colleagues have obtained suggests the peak of Wanjina production was 1500 to 500 years ago.

And the more ancient Gwions? “Mike and I know people were

living the northwest Kimberley at least 36,000 years ago,” says Ross. She and Morwood note that University of Wollongong dating expert Maxime Aubert is testing samples right now that may push the age of the art back beyond 40,000 years.

In a scientific twist, Aubert is using the same technique used to date El Castillo’s red handprints and disks. Expect headlines worldwide when the team’s paper hits the scientific press.



“Where there’s water there’s rock art. The sheer volume and sheer variety is striking.”

Dr June Ross.

Image (top):
Excavations at
Brrremangurey.

Image (bottom):
Dr Kira Westaway
OSL dating.

Your support

Your support allows us to fund our research program in which leading scientists and academics across Australia are working towards ensuring that the rock art of the Kimberley is recognised and promoted for its world-wide significance and is protected and preserved accordingly. All amounts of \$2 and over are tax deductible.



KFA acknowledges the support of The Ian Potter Foundation

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Image:

KFA Chairman Maria Myers at the UWA announcement of the appointment of Prof Peter Veth.



“We will achieve internationally recognised research excellence in another significant art region of Western Australia.”

Professor Jo McDonald.

Images (clockwise from top): Bill Townsend, INPEX and Potter Chairman Charles Goode.

Sir Daryl Dawson and Prof Peter Veth.

Lady Primrose Potter and Dr John Rose.



We wish all our supporters a peaceful and happy festive season and New Year.

UWA positioned to lead Australia rock art research

The Kimberley Foundation Australia's role in positioning UWA's Centre for Rock Art Research and Management (CRARM) to lead Australian rock art research is significant.

KFA's pursuit and diligence in the establishment of a Chair in Kimberley Rock Art will pay dividends said KFA Chairman Maria Myers. "This has been years in the planning the last couple of which have brought it to fruition. We are absolutely thrilled with the appointment of an archaeologist of Peter Veth's renown and experience," she said.

Prof Jo McDonald, CRARM director said the appointment of Prof Veth meant CRARM was now positioned strategically to lead Australian rock art research in a number of globally significant research agendas.

"By building on existing research collaborations with KFA, Kimberley Traditional Owner groups and developing cross-campus collaborations to date rock art, we will achieve internationally recognised research excellence in another significant art region of Western Australia," she said.

Patron Emeritus Dame Elisabeth Murdoch AC, DBE

KFA milestone celebrated

KFA Chairman Maria Myers hosted an intimate event to pay tribute to The Ian Potter Foundation and to introduce Prof Peter Veth to the Board of Governors and leading Melbourne philanthropists in Melbourne on 3rd December.

The Chairman of The Ian Potter Foundation, Mr Charles Goode AC, Life Governor Lady Primrose Potter

AC and Governors Prof Geoffrey Blainey AC, The Hon Sir Daryl Dawson AC KBE, The Hon Sir James Gobbo AC CVO, Mr John Gough AO OBE, Dr Tom Hurley AO OBE and Dr John Rose AO, were all present to hear Prof Veth speak of his vision for further research into Kimberley rock art. Mr Bill Townsend from INPEX was also acknowledged for the significant contribution from INPEX.



KFA public lecture at UNSW

Dr June Ross discussed the findings of the multidisciplinary team involved in the 3-year archaeological project in NW Kimberley at the inaugural KFA

public lecture at UNSW on 21 November (see story inside). The Chancellor UNSW, Mr David Gonski AC, introduced Dr Ross and nearly 130 people mingled with KFA Directors and supporters. KFA plans to present the lecture in Sydney on an annual basis.

KFA pays tribute to the great philanthropic work of Dame Elisabeth Murdoch, Patron Emeritus of KFA and longterm supporter of Grahame Walsh's research

into Kimberley rock art. She was passionately interested in the stories that lie behind the rock art. Because of her support those stories are closer to realisation.