

# Kimberley cries out for conservation

Australia has a one-off opportunity to safeguard a precious natural heritage, argues **Andrew Burbidge**

**T**he International Union for the Conservation of Nature's Red List highlighting endangered species is becoming Australia's annual embarrassment.

Every year we have the worst record in the world for mammal extinctions. We have already lost more than 20 mammals and another eight cling to a precarious existence on islands after being extinguished from the mainland. But if we don't act soon this could get a lot worse.

While Australians have stepped up to protect the Great Barrier Reef, Kakadu and the Tarkine, we are letting slip a region where there has never been a mammal extinction or serious species decline — the north Kimberley.

The Kimberley is one of Australia's 15 biodiversity hot spots. Its isolation and rugged terrain has made it home to 57 species of mammals. Some, such as the scaly tailed possum and the monjon — Australia's smallest rock wallaby — exist nowhere else.

Then there are those mammals that we have pushed to the brink of extinction in every other part of Australia. The northern quoll has been decimated by the cane toad, but is still abundant in the north Kimberley as is the golden-backed tree rat, which is extinct in the Northern Territory, and the glorious golden bandicoot, which once lived

across the Top End and central deserts.

Along the coast are many islands where dugongs, rare marine turtles and the recently discovered snubfin dolphin live in tidal inlets.

This region is home to possibly the world's biggest humpback whale calving area. The coast is much the same as when viewed by Phillip Parker King, the Royal Navy hydrographer who charted it between 1819 and 1821.

King's descriptions of the rugged orange sandstones and black volcanic dolerite, the enormous tidal range — up to 11m — the extensive mangroves, rainforest patches, abundant crocodiles and other wildlife are as valid today as when he wrote them.

However, the remoteness of the Kimberley does not, unfortunately, mean that the landscape, plants and animals are not threatened.

Feral animals are increasingly abundant — feral cats are eliminating native animals and feral cattle and donkeys are damaging vegetation, especially riverine wetlands and forests, and causing soil erosion. Big, late dry season fires are now common and many areas are badly damaged every year. The signs of imminent collapse are already there — scaly tailed possums are dying out, there is increasing riverine degradation and soil erosion due to feral cattle and donkeys and a loss of rainforests due to cattle

grazing and fires.

Discovery of vast reserves of natural gas in the nearby Browse Basin means large-scale development may adversely affect the area. But because it is so remote, the north Kimberley has been "out of sight, out of mind" for most politicians and bureaucrats.

If we are serious about our environment, then it is time to give this region the highest level of protection and international recognition.

And the Aboriginals who have inhabited the Kimberley for many tens of thousands of years must be intimately involved in every step of this process. Their living culture and knowledge of the plants, animals and landscapes are invaluable and much of the area is Aboriginal land or under native title claim.

It would need to be a "win-win" for the Aboriginals of the area. The plants and animals of the region would benefit from major new funding for management by local people to continue the application of traditional knowledge alongside scientific research, monitoring and advice.

Most tourists who visit the Kimberley marvel at its scenery and its extraordinarily rich Aboriginal art, but contribute little to the area's traditional owners.

World Heritage listing, for example, has been spoken of for some years in the region.

If a nomination was broadly supported by the people of the region and beyond, and ultimately successful, it would attract many more visitors.

I have been travelling as a research scientist to study the Kimberley since 1971 and significant biological work still continues in the north Kimberley today.

Many species of plants and animals new to science have been described. While it is clear that the north Kimberley is a special place for the conservation of the nation's biota, it is equally clear that we still have much to learn about it.

One question that we answered recently was: are the north Kimberley mammals still as abundant as they were in the 1970s?

In 2004 some of my colleagues and I revisited the places we had surveyed in the early 1970s.

At one place I was able to pitch my tent in exactly the same spot as 30 years before.

We found that most mammals were still present. However, small native rodents had become very rare. These seed eaters have been affected by frequent fires removing their food plants and many seed-eating birds had similarly declined.

Now, more than 35 years after I fell in love with the Kimberley, I am seeing a resurgence of the interest in its riches. Mostly this interest is directed at resources that might be exploited.

There is a great opportunity for us as a nation to ensure that the Kimberley is properly recognised as a place of value to the whole world as well as a place where Aboriginals continue to be the area's custodians, as they have for aeons.

**Dr Andrew Burbidge is chairman of the WWF-Australia Scientific Advisory Committee.**



Hot spot: King George Falls in the Kimberley. Despite its remoteness the landscape, plants and animals are threatened