

Kulaluk as a Heritage Site

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There have been many histories and reports documenting the Kulaluk lease but none rigorously document the potential of the lease as a heritage site or the sites within it deserving of protection. Partly this is because it was presumed that once the area had been granted to Aboriginal people as a special purpose lease, the significant sites would be protected. This was indeed the intention of the original claim to the land. However, after the land was handed over in 1979 it quickly became apparent that the leaseholders saw the lease as ripe for development. As real estate, the leaseholders took no interest in documenting sites, bird life, vegetation, historical sites or maintaining public access, even for Aboriginal people. Very little land management has been carried out. The impression was perhaps deliberately given that the land was Aboriginal land and anyone other than the lease holders were trespassing. Despite these prohibitions, the writer lived for six years on the lease from 1979 to 1985 and again in 1996 and 1997. Some observations are listed below.

Mangroves.

A large proportion of the Kulaluk lease includes healthy mangrove forests. This is no coincidence, as the Interim Aboriginal Land Commissioner, Mr Justice Ward deliberately recommended that the boundaries of the lease extend beyond the high tide level and into the middle of Ludmilla Creek in recognition of the importance of the mangrove habitat for subsistence hunting and gathering for Aboriginal people. The various foods available in the mangroves and tidal flats are listed by Henderson (1983) and others.

Monsoon Forest.

The Kulaluk lease contains the largest area of healthy coastal monsoon forest surviving in the Darwin area, stretching from Ludmilla Creek to behind Bakhita Village. This forest provides shelter for a range of native fauna, flora and bird life including an undocumented number of large jungle fowl nesting mounds. Leaf litter shelters native snails and large hermit crabs, now seldom seen elsewhere in Darwin. Aboriginal women harvest various foods and materials for handicrafts from this forest, including yams, berries, leaves and dyes. Tracks reveal a population of wallabies and reptiles. The various fauna species undoubtedly move between East Point and the lease, although no study has been done. Parts of the forest are threatened by encroaching grasslands and coffee bush. A high water table and remnant vegetation makes reforestation possible if fires are controlled.

Salt pan.

The Kulaluk salt pan is a flat area of about eight hectares easily seen on older aerial photographs. It was inundated by tides between 7 – 8 metres and supported a variety of wildlife, such as fiddler crabs and burrowing crustaceans. At night, during spring tides when the tidal flats of the adjoining bay were flooded, the salt pan provided a safe roosting place for migratory birds, protected under international treaties. In 1996 much of the salt pan was excavated for a prawn farm, which failed and was followed years later by a crab farm, which also failed and now lies abandoned. Under the permit for the prawn farm, if the project ends, the land must be restored. This has yet to be done. However, the salt pan is worth restoring, not only for the above reasons, but because it acts as a natural fire break protecting the surviving monsoon forest. The salt pan was also used as a pathway by Aboriginal families to access the fishing grounds and beach. The aquaculture ponds have affected access by forming a barrier to pedestrians. They had some historical significance in being used for football matches and as an unofficial speedway.

Beach

A narrow beach runs for the length of the lease between Nightcliff and Ludmilla Creek. The beach is designated as a public right-of-way. In the 1970s the beach was easily accessible but since properties were developed almost to the high tide level in Coconut Grove and fill dumped to prevent erosion, parts of the beach between Ostermann Street Bakhita Village are not easy to access. Drains into the

mangroves have also become deep tidal creeks, difficult to cross. In the past, four wheel drive vehicles, trail bikes and quad bikes have used the beach as a thoroughfare. Despite this, the beach is an important fringing area between the mangroves and the monsoon forest, providing flotsam food for scavenging crabs, birdlife and wallabies, acting as storm barrier and the allowing the ransference of seeds

Ludmilla Creek

Few people are aware of the full extent of the Ludmilla Creek and its tidal reaches. In 2013 a boat trip was organised to show politicians the potential of the creek as a tourist destination at high tide. Similarly, the Environment Centre organised a kayak expedition through the mangroves at the creek mouth at high tide. Aboriginal people and others use the creek for crabbing, fishing and recreation. Obviously, the creek maintains a great deal of marine life, although there is little or no supervision of how it is harvested.

Rice fields

The so-called rice fields are a reedy freshwater swamp between Dick Ward Drive and the monsoon forest, the home of Burdekin ducks, Jabiru, magpie geese and various reptiles. Almost half of the freshwater reeds have died through saltwater intrusion since 1985 when excavated drainage channels facilitated high tides to flow into the area. Presumably the flats were once used to grow rice, as evident by the name and the earth wall on the western edge of the freshwater swamp. There is, or was, a concrete lined well and cattle trough in the north west corner as evidence of past agricultural use.

Burial grounds

In 1971 Larrakia elder Victor Williams noted that there had been at least 200 burials on the lease when the land was part of the Bagot Aboriginal Reserve, With Welfare Officer Jack Doolan, Mr Williams marked out the old Bagot Cemetery and said that at least ten graves were not located. An eyewitness on a Youtube recording describes mortuary ceremonies elsewhere on the lease in the 1960s. The burials were in an era when Aboriginal people did not use the general cemetery and were allowed to conduct their own burials. Henderson's map shows a "Pukamani ground" extending from behind the site of the Retta Dixon Home.

Retta Dixon Home

The site of the old "half-caste's" home is now known as Karu Park. It's use is well documented and at the time was excised from the surrounding Bagot Reserve. Anecdotely, he children extensively used the surrounding bushland and beaches. For the purpose of heritage preservation Karu Park is an integral part of the Kulaluk lease.

Fred Fogarty's camp (Fish Camp)

In time, Fred Fogarty's contribution to the national land rights movement will undoubtedly be recognised. From 1975 he constructed a hut out of materials salvaged from the Ludmilla dump after the dump was used to bury demolition material after Cyclone Tracy. Fred's hut was demolished by the leaseholders after his death in March, 1985. The hut was an outstanding example of Aboriginal initiative and self-sufficiency, as well as being a meeting place for activists in the national land rights movement. A replica of Fred's hut could be constructed on the site. Many of the trees Fred planted are still growing in the area. Some of his signage remains, along with traces of his hand-dug wells used for his reforestation project.

Gunabibi (Kunapipi) Ceremony Ground

James Gaykamungu of Bagot has written a history of this ceremony ground on the eastern side of Dick Ward Drive on the Kulaluk lease, behind Harney Street. In 1983 the importance of the site was emphasised by the Aboriginal Sacred Sites Authority. In 2011 the site was nominated for registration as an Aboriginal site.

Other culturally significant areas

During the years that the larea was incorporated into Bagot Aboriginal Reserves, it appears that certain areas were used as ceremony grounds where initiations were held. A site behind McDonalds Restaurant was nominated as a site of significance by the late Joe Jefferies and others. Aboriginal people camped

at the old Fish Camp between 1996 and 2001 held several documented ceremonies at their campsite, illustrating the point that Aboriginal people need areas of bushland shielded from the public to maintain their religious and cultural life. This would include instructing children in bush skills and hunting and gathering, as well as recreation.

Bagot Aboriginal Community

The Aboriginal Land Rights Commissioner, Judge A E Woodward, cited the inseparable history of Bagot as a reason for compensation for the revoking of the reserve in 1965. Socially and historically, the Bagot Community is an integral part of the Kulaluk lease and the health of the population has always depended on this relationship. It is important for the mental health of Aboriginal people in Darwin that such areas exist.

Military Sites

The best surviving example of a World War II concrete bunker outside of East Point in the Darwin area exists on the edge of the Kulaluk beach. This bunker has soldiers' names and numbers etched into the internal walls. However, in recent years the fort is rapidly becoming unsafe. Other military sites such as dumps and a rifle range have been damaged by earthworks without being recorded.

Heritage trees

There are many trees on the Kulaluk lease worthy of listing as heritage trees that are yet to be documented. One tree on the lease near Totem Road is registered by AAPA as "Sacred Tree". Bill Day's old camp has a shady grove of tamarind trees that are now 35 years old and continue to self seed. The excavation of drains and aquaculture ponds destroyed isolated groves of Casuarina trees used by campers, and shell middens under these trees.

Mythology

There are several mythological stories associated with the lease area. One relates to a half-man-half-pig creature that inhabits the area. This story is used to frighten children. The spring at Kulaluk is connected by an underground channel created by the "Rainbow Serpent" to other sites such as Emery Point, Belyuen and Old Man Rock. As such, the Kulaluk area involves many more Aboriginal people than just the current leaseholders.

Other historical sites

Henderson lists a site known as "Chinese Well" between Dick Ward Drive and Bagot Road. As mentioned above there is another more substantially lined well on the edge of the rice field. Bill Day's camp is worth a mention as a historical site. This area was successfully used for Bagot children's vacation activities, demonstrating the possibilities of the area for educational activities, nature trails and the like.