

IDENTIFICATION

Nomination : Kakadu National Park
Location : Northern Territory
State Party : Australia
Date : 1 October 1991

DESCRIPTION AND HISTORY

The Kakadu National Park is of the highest interest as an extensive archaeological and ethnological reservation. The first remains of human occupation in Australia, dating from nearly 40,000 years ago, have been identified there. On various sites, excavations have brought to light groups of stone tools, which, because of the axes of polished stone they include, are counted among the oldest in the world; further, in conjunction with the sites of rock paintings, workshops for preparing pigments have been studied which date back at least 18,000 years.

It is, of course, the aboriginal rock paintings of Kakadu which constituted the decisive argument for the inscription of this cultural property on the World Heritage List in 1981, based on cultural Criteria i, iii, and iv.

These paintings, executed in the open on rock walls, cover a long chronological span, since the oldest date back nearly 20,000 years and the most recent are from contemporary times.

For the historian, they constitute a fund of documentary evidence of primordial importance and a source which is unique. In fact, they serve as a source of information on the primal resources, the hunting and fishing activities, the social structure, and the ritual ceremonies of the aboriginal population which have succeeded one another on the site of Kakadu. They bear witness to vanished species, such as the Tasmanian wolf, and allow one to follow, in the details of equipment and of costume, the modifications brought to bear on traditional life by the contacts which were established with Macanese fishermen from the 16th century, and then with Europeans.

For the art historian, the ensemble of paintings and pictograms of Kakadu is unique to the extent that it combines multiple figurative and non-figurative styles, which vary in their apparent chronology with those ensembles, recently inventoried, in southern Africa and in the Sahara. An aesthetic, peculiar to representations of animals and humans in Arnhem Land, may have, moreover, had an influence on graphic forms which appeared after 1930.

For the ethnologist, Kakadu offers a privileged field of exploration and observation, as the Aborigines who continue to inhabit this site contribute to the maintenance of the balance of the ecosystem and, through

traditional techniques, ensure the necessary preservation of the most recent rock paintings. The social - if not the ritual - function of these is preserved to a certain extent.

COMMENTS

In the two earlier nominations, the Australian Government clearly set out the three phases of the National Park Project. Phase III is the subject of this (final) additional nomination. All the criteria for inscription accepted in respect of Phases I and II still apply, and the area covered includes another important group of rock-art and other prehistoric sites.

The nomination papers have been referred to the President of the ICOMOS International Committee on Rock Art, who warmly endorses the extension of the World Heritage Site.

ICOMOS RECOMMENDATION

That the cultural property be extended to cover Phase III of the Kakadu National Park Project (already included under cultural criteria i, iii, and iv).

ICOMOS, October 1992

Kakadu : carte du site / map of the site