

The Unwritten Country

For as long as anyone can remember, people have walked and sailed around the Gulf of Carpentaria. There is an old Creation Story about taking things away from the country. It happened in the Dreaming when the Malinggarri mob had a competition to be the first to kill a Dugong. Travelling by canoe along the coast from Vanderlin Island, one group killed a Dugong and dragged it up onto a dry reef, but were themselves killed when they fell down into a jagged coral sinkhole. The place became known as Yumunguni Island, Marra country.

The great winds that travel around the Gulf brought the Macassans in their boats to take away sea-cucumber, from the Arnhemlanders, in the early 1600's. Thus the Macassans became the first people to export resources from the Arnhem coast to the Chinese. The Roper Gulf remained virtually untouched, and all the way from Queensland to the Roper Bar and up as far inland as Mataranka, the Saltwater people, Alawa, and Mangarrayi were united by songlines that reinforced the power of the Wata (wind), and Walalu (cyclone). Not until the late 19th century when the cattlemen silenced the lives and song of most of the Marra and Alawa people was the country first populated as whitefella land.

In creating the Roper River Mission (now Ngukurr) in 1908, the last of the countrymen were saved by the missionaries – avoiding certain genocide. The Wagilak Songmen took the Wata away into central Arnhem Land, where the people were still free to speak and sing in their own language, the stories of the ancestors. The Wagilak Songmen remarkably still sing about the land in Ngukurr today, and all the tribes join in.

The head of the Church at Ngukurr, Andrew Robertson, is worried that the new explorers to walk the land will “divide our people and culture” like never before. Not with horses and guns, but with computers, helicopters, and bulldozers.

This time it's not sea-cucumber but iron ore that is being offered to China, through the massive deposits that Western Desert Resources, and Sherwin Iron have found in Marra, Alawa, and Mangarrayi land. Not many of the locals know what is going on but everyone knows the pristine Gulf country is managed and owned by everyone. The songs still commemorate the Creation Stories of the Mermaid, Kangaroo, Barramundi, and King Brown.

The first priority for the mine located in the proposed Limmen National Park is to cut a \$24 million road to the coast, then spend \$50 million to dredge through the seagrass shallows out to Maria Island. Then up to 4 million tonnes of ore per year for the next 40 years can be directly shipped to China.

“This will kill our country and our people”, says Traditional Owner Godfrey Blitner. Life will undoubtedly be different too for the thousands of wild Barramundi that rely on the prawn spawning salt flats where the proposed road will go. The Dugong, Flatback, and Green Turtles that currently migrate along the inaccessible coastline may soon have to share their waters with barges and container ships.

If all goes well for the new explorers a port on the coast will be built where the oldest living Marra woman – Maureen Marrangula Thompson’s step-father is buried, with the last known Marra canoe in the sand dunes, near Galwanji, the sacred ceremony ground. Old Stanley may literally be about to turn in his grave.

Would be investors are rest assured that extensive community consultation is underway, despite fights breaking out during the recent meeting in Ngukurr about who should be entitled to royalties from the multi-billion dollar venture. According to the Western Desert Resources website there are “no cultural or heritage values” that will impact on the establishment of the mine. A dividing line is being drawn in the sand.

This exhibition presents sites that have rarely been seen, or photographed, places that are known today through songs that map the country. This is the unwritten country.

Simon Normand –Nov 2010