

DJALKIRI MAGIC

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When Angus and Rose Cameron first begun talking about this project, it was catalysed by the 150th anniversary of the publication of the 'Origin of Species' by Charles Darwin in London in 1859. The initial concept was to involve a group of high-profile artists and a fieldtrip to a biological diverse and culturally strong location in the Top End of the Northern Territory.

A previous art and biocultural knowledge project we had undertaken at Nauiyu on the Daly River, with a couple of the same artists had been highly successful from an artistic, scientific and biocultural perspective. The beautiful prints and associated interpretive materials developed in 2006 are still travelling around Australian art galleries, botanic gardens and scientific institutions telling a powerful story about biodiversity, people and cultural connections.

One of the great joys of working on pristine country, with countrymen and biodiversity in the cultural landscapes of north Australia is that even the best plans generally do not follow script. This of course negates the need for all but the most rudimentary planning, which is good, but it means you have to follow the script as it evolves and 'stay on the horse', which may not be good.

In line with basic gist of Charles Darwin's 'Origin of Species' this is exactly what happened during Djalkiri. While the field trip and the artistic process followed the basic bones of the plan, the flesh was added in a seemingly unstructured evolution of artistic discovery and biocultural knowledge exchange.

Watching the artists interact with the incredible biodiversity of Yilpara and the Blue Mud area, with the senior biocultural knowledge custodians who accompanied us on country, with each other and with the other members of the Djalkiri team was both enthralling and highly educational.

While undertaking a welcoming-introductory walk around Yilpara with Djambawa and Marrirra Marawili and Mulkun Wurrpanda on the first morning of our visit, I was overcome by a feeling of desolation and sadness of such intensity that I quietly wept. This has not happened to me before or since. However, the thoughts of the wonderful elders I have worked with over the last few decades, who have now left us, came to me strongly.

The cultural and emotional power of the artwork prepared during Djalkiri comes to me now as I look at the plates, the detail, the range of biodiversity, the stories behind it, the memories of the artists and Djalkiri group working together to 'stay on the horse' as the project evolved with us.

Blue Mud Bay is a famous and wonderful place, in a famous and wonderful region. North-east Arnhem Land is a bastion of Australian Aboriginal cultural and biological knowledge. It is linguistically diverse and biologically rich and is the home of the unanimously respected Yolngu clans. The region is famous for a number of spectacular episodes that have occurred there since settlement. There have been notorious killings of Japanese fishers and police, famed bark

paintings and large mining operations. However Blue Mud Bay is most famous for the momentous High Court decision in 2008 to give traditional owners exclusive rights over tidal waterways fringing Aboriginal Land.

Yilpara on Blue Mud Bay is a special place. Djalkiri is a special word. It has several meanings, one of which relates to footprints, but it also refers to deep, hidden knowledge.

Visual art is a powerful mechanism for telling stories, it is a primary vector for knowledge transmission. All humans relate to art in some way.

Biodiversity, mainly plants and animals, have cultural importance for all *Homo sapiens*, no matter how far removed we might be from our traditional cultural and survival-based links.

This combination of visual art and biodiversity is a wonderful mechanism for preserving and promoting biocultural diversity, which is north Australia's most threatened biological and cultural heritage.

How does a book about human evolution written by Charles Darwin in southern England 150 years ago lead to the preparation of these magnificent plates from Arnhem Land drenched in artistic detail, cultural knowledge, visual beauty and scientific accuracy?

Djalkiri magic from Blue Mud Bay.