

1 September 2009

IMPORTANT CULTURAL SITE TO BE PROTECTED

Work to protect 'Kukirrka' or Burkes Cave, an important site for both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people, began today.

Located on a property in the Scopes ranges, 80 kilometres east of Broken Hill, it comprises a cave and shelter in close proximity to a waterhole, which historically was a reliable water source for people when travelling away from the Darling River.

Feral goats and rainfall have been damaging the site. Work began today by members of the Menindee CDEP to install gridlock mesh and driplines to protect the Aboriginal artworks in the area.

Western Catchment Management Authority Aboriginal Community Support Officer and well known Baarkindji woman from the Menindee area, Dot Stephens, says it's an important site for many reasons.

"To the local Baarkindji people it is known as 'kukirrka', meaning 'birthing place'. Women used the cave to give birth to their babies 'nupree'. Once born, the babies were washed in a stone depression to the rear of the cave.

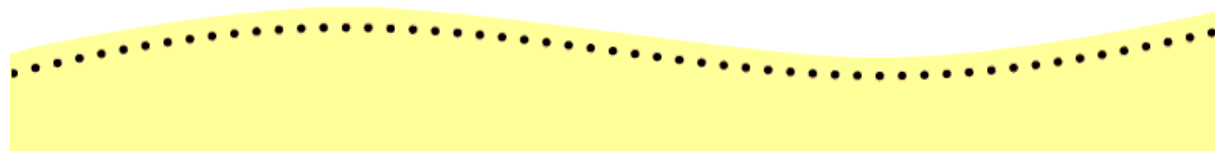
"The men waited in the shelter while the women gave birth. Aboriginal rock art comprising stencils of yellow and white painted lines extend the full length of the shelter and there are additional stencils of red, yellow and white ochre. Tools such as grinding stones, flacks and black axe heads are found in the area," Ms Stephens said.

The area is also important due to its non-Aboriginal historical significance. It was one of the camps on Burke and Wills' 1,800 mile (2,900 km) expedition from Melbourne to the Gulf of Carpentaria.

Dr Herman Beckler, the expedition's botanist and medical officer, records their impressions of the site when they arrived on 21 December 1860: "*The whole area formed a small paradise before us*" and "*The friendly little mountain range, ... a picturesque gorge, We were most pleasantly surprised to find sufficient water in a rock reservoir for both us and our animals.*" This was no mean feat as their party comprised eighteen men, twenty-four camels and twenty-three horses.

Its status as a reliable water source led to its becoming a stop-over on the Cobb and Co. route from Broken Hill to Wilcannia. There is a sizeable collection of names and dates carved into the rocks, presumably from travellers, some from as early as 1887.

"At the moment feral goats are wandering into the caves and rubbing against and damaging the artwork on the cave walls. Rainfall seeping down the walls is also affecting the artwork," Ms Stephens said.



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Through the Western Catchment Management Authority's (CMA) High Conservation Value program, funding has been sourced to erect gridlock mesh to exclude goats from the cave and to erect a drip-line to divert rainfall from the artworks.

The construction work will be undertaken by Baarkindji people through the Menindee Community Development Employment Project (CDEP).

A number of people visited the site today including Baarkindji Elders Kicko King from the Menindee Local Aboriginal Land Council and Uncle Bill Riley of the Western Catchment Aboriginal Reference Advisory Group.

Menindee CDEP workers Gail Philp and her grandson, Kyle Philp, started the works including installing a dripline on the men's shelter today. Gail and Kyle are descendants of Lorraine (Lala) King, who to their knowledge, is the oldest Aboriginal woman in the far-west of NSW.

As well as learning some construction and site protection skills, they are being taught the significance of the site. The site will be monitored on an annual basis by Baarkindji elders.

"It's hard to say when women stopped using the site to give birth. Obviously as Aboriginal people were moved onto missions and squatters moved onto the land it disrupted the patterns and traditions of the Baarkindji people," Ms Stephens said.

Gail Philp said she'd heard about the site but had never visited it. "This is the first birthing site I've ever seen. It's a very special place and it's important that it's protected. I'd really like to bring my other grandchildren to see it," Ms Philp said.

Another benefit of the project is sharing the information about the site with other Baarkindji people.

Kicko King said he had heard stories about the site over the past twenty years but hadn't previously visited it. "When the Menindee Mission was closed and people were sent to Lake Cargelligo on the Lachlan River, people weren't allowed to pass on their language and culture so the Elders kept many of the stories to themselves," Mr King said.

The site is located on private property and people wanting to visit it must have the permission of the landholder and visits should be undertaken in conjunction with the Baarkindji Elders Group.

People interested in accessing funding to undertake work to improve natural resources in their area should contact their local Western CMA office or ring 1800 032 101. Applications for funding through the Western CMA's 2009 Incentives Program will be accepted until September 25.

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For more information:

Maree Barnes on 0427 256814 or Dot Stephens on 08 8082 5207



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Captions:

Dot_Gail: Dorothy Stephens and Gail Philip at the women's birthing cave at Kukirrka/Burkes Cave.

3_men_in_shelter: Kicko King, Uncle Bill Riley and Kyle Philp inside the men's shelter at Kukirrka/Burkes Cave

Kyle_Dripline: Kyle Philp installs a dripline on the men's shelter to protect artworks.

Baarkindji Group: Kicko King, Dorothy Stephens, Uncle Bill Riley, Gail Phil and Kyle Philp

Graffiti: The site was a stop-over on the Cobb and Co. route from Broken Hill to Wilcannia and graffiti dates back to the late 1800s.

Birthing Cave: Baarkindji women gave birth in this cave.

Shelter: Aboriginal artworks adorn the walls of the rock shelter, where men waited while the women gave birth.

