

THE AUSTRALIAN

Grand plan for an ancient landscape



Atticus Fleming, chief executive of the Australian Wildlife Conservancy, at Mount Brennan in Mornington Wildlife Sanctuary. Picture: Colin Murty Source: The Australian

THEY surge upwards, red against red, line giving way to line, the .dhranges of the Kimberley, serrated, ancient: home to nature, home, also, to the most ambitious land and wildlife preservation project yet mounted in Australia's hard, half-mastered north.

This is Mornington, on the curving Fitzroy River's upper reaches: once a vast cattle station, today the jewel in the crown of the Australian Wildlife Conservancy.

Mornington is both a research base and the central point in the network of Kimberley properties AWC controls or manages: almost 900,000 hectares of peaks and valleys, gorges, escarpments and eucalypt-covered plains; land flood-washed in the wet, fire-scoured in the dry; land almost empty, and almost unreachable by road; long seen as frontier country, without anything beyond the drama of its beauty to draw the human eye.

It is here, at AWC's rough and ready field headquarters, in a scatter of small, low-slung offices, that a grand plan for the region is being implemented. Step by step, a blueprint is being tested, fine-tuned and put to work - with striking results. Gradually, the northern landscape is divulging its secrets: the strange logic by which its intermeshing components run.

Gradually, its face is being changed. Scientists and research students flock each year to Mornington, and through their efforts, a baroque story is emerging: a tale of animals and landscape at risk, their fate in the balance.



Sarah Legge and Lindsay Malay, with Lady Forrest Range behind. Picture: Colin Murty Source: The Australian

It is the story AWC was created to tell and bring to light. The organisation's origins lie in the purchase of a land sanctuary two decades ago. It became a public charity in 2001, just as Mornington was being acquired, and that was also the time when its driven chief executive, Atticus Fleming, took the reins. Since then, AWC has grown fast, and changed from a mild non-profit into a crusading force. Its mission statement is unequivocal: AWC exists to further one cause - "the effective conservation of all Australian animal species and the habitats in which they live".

This is not meant as a quaint aspiration. Under Fleming's guidance, the group has taken hold of 23 sizeable bush properties, almost 3 million hectares of diverse eco-systems that are home to 83 per cent of all Australian native bird species and 67 per cent of native animal species, many rare and endangered. A mere 10 per cent of its funds go on administrative costs, while the rest is ploughed into managing and restoring the country on a heroic scale.

In addition to its Kimberley stake, it holds key parts of lower Cape York, the Lake Eyre region, the savannah fringes of the Gulf and south Arnhem Land, and a western desert sandhill reserve.

Perhaps the most intriguing aspect of this fast-paced expansion has been its financing. For 10 of its 23 land acquisitions, AWC has received commonwealth funding, in most cases at between half and two thirds of the total cost.

In low-key fashion, a significant part of the national conservation effort has over the past decade been outsourced to a non-government operation.

Behind this process, and the growth and positioning of AWC and its linking of science and keen publicity, we may discern the elfin, activist figure of Fleming: bush-raised, in Baker's Swamp, a nature lover when young, a corporate takeover specialist in his law firm years, a long-term senior adviser to Coalition environment minister Robert Hill - before the apotheosis came, and he threw that world away. In the entrails of the political system, Fleming had learned a few things, and conceived a view of how to change the national conservation estate.

His vision was practical, and he refined it as he went. He realised, of course, that government had a key role in preserving the bush and its creatures, but he felt delivery wasn't its strong point.

On his travels with Hill he had seen the way private conservation groups had been working overseas. There were lessons for Australia and for the present. He realised that if you mean to run land for a set purpose, you need to know exactly what you hold, and what you want to achieve.

Successful idealism requires efficiency. You need, in short, a sure accounting method, hence the idea of natural capital underpins AWC's operations: measure your capital and gauge your land's ecological health. Integrate science and land management systems. All this, presented as a grand vision, rang bells with the key donors who have stood behind AWC's expansion.

"A lot of our supporters come from business," Fleming says. "They want to see some objective measurement of what we claim as our success; they want to know they are getting a return for their gifts to us in the form of strengthened natural capital."

In short, something of the mind-set of the business world came into the non-profit sector when AWC began its growth.

"We borrow some of the disciplines and systems you would use in a good commercial operation and integrate them into this non-profit framework."

Hence the driven atmospherics of AWC's operation. Fleming raises about \$10 million a year to keep the venture going, and his methods are persistent. His email fund soliciting campaign is a round-the-clock affair: at the sound of his hesitant-seeming voice or his soft footfall, corporate captains blanch and pull their chequebooks out.

His newsletters, with their freight of impressive findings, tug at the hearts of everyday nature lovers: his capacity to stuff the high-end media with lovely images that fuel fresh fundraising campaigns is legendary.

How could it be otherwise? AWC has almost 0.5 per cent of the Australian continent's land mass to manage,

even if that management isn't about the sheer scale of the holdings, but the fretwork of living creatures they harbour in their midst. Implicit in this private sector project is a quiet condemnation of the tranquil, official Australian nature and wildlife conservation status quo.

AWC's special focus is the north, because that's where development has changed the country least, and because the north and inland are where the most pressing threats to the natural environment lie.

Fleming is explicit: "We understand what's happening now. We understand the impact of what we've been doing to the land and we have the opportunity to move to overcome it.

"My vision is to make sure we do that, particularly in the north, where we can still intervene." There are national parks strewn through this region, but the contrast between their workings and those of properties such as Mornington exposes the contradictions in the public parks system.

What is a national park for? To divert the touristic public, protect wildlife, lock up land types or, when placed on indigenous land, be of some benefit to its Aboriginal owners? All these goals, of course.

Take commonwealth-run Kakadu, twice the size of the AWC Kimberley estate, and similar in some respects, built, also, on the bones of clapped-out cattle stations. Ostensibly, Kakadu is a tourism hub, but its visitor numbers are declining, great parts of it are closed off, and a small-mammal population crash is unfolding on its land. AWC's model may overlap in some degree with the mission of the large northern public parks, but it runs its land quite differently.

It has a single aim - species preservation - and pursues scientific research aimed at furthering that goal, and it is responsible only to its corporate-flavoured board.

Further, AWC has worked out its land management priorities. It believes it has a broad sense of what drives and shapes the landscape and animal numbers on Mornington and the two adjacent holdings, Tableland and Marion Downs. Perhaps the most persuasive detail in Fleming's practised pitch for support lies in a simple number. The research is clear: introduced feral cats in the north kill 2 million small native animals every day (by extrapolation, the figure is 70 million for Australia as a whole). Wildcats in the landscape are the key introduced destabilisers, the destroyers: they interact with fire to devastate the original fauna. How, though, to remove them? They are omnipresent in the landscape, but hardly ever seen.

The country of the north has also been laid waste by two more obvious large-scale influences: introduced grass-eating animals - cattle, horses, goats and donkeys - and by uncontrolled fires that burn across its face from the start to the end of each long dry. Of course, the landscape needs fire, it is fire-adapted, but the fires it adapted to over millennia were low-intensity early season fires, mostly lit with careful intent by human hand. In the cattle era of the past two centuries, and in the time when Aboriginal stewardship fell into abeyance, late season, hot fires have become the norm. The result is depleted ground cover and reduced rare species habitat.

Control fire, remove cattle, understand how cats thrive and change those conditions, and you start to get somewhere. Such is the AWC plan for the country it holds: a simple plan given grand effect.

"We're obsessed with being able to deliver conservation," Fleming says. "In so many parts of Australia, we, the community, are getting it spectacularly wrong. The fire management is wrong, the feral animal control is poor."

The warning signs have been plain for years: species vanishing, species threatened, particularly lovely birds like the multicoloured Gouldian Finch dwindling in numbers, introduced weeds spreading. The research at Mornington to combat these pressures is fine-grained.

There's a genetics lab, there are cat-detector dogs and radio-collaring programs to track predator movements.

What comes from this program is sometimes revelatory. It is increasingly clear that wildcats know when hot fires have burned and seek out that scorched country and patrol there for easy kills. It is also plain that dingoes, long hunted by pastoralists as vermin, tend to suppress cat numbers and activity. But the larger measures that can restore the landscape to something more like ecological wellbeing are broad-scale and dramatic, and they provide the best index of the thinking that drives AWC.

In the northern savannah, all begins and ends with fire, and, as AWC chief scientist Sarah Legge, who has been based at Mornington for eight years, puts it: "A lot of north Australian fire management lacks finesse and sophistication."

Air-delivered, landscape-scale burning is increasingly accepted as a useful land management tool and is being taken to a new level of intensity here.

AWC has set up a controlled burning project called Ecofire, which has been run for the past five years. It operates across AWC properties, but also includes the cattle stations to the north and west: a total of 4 million connected hectares. The results are in: they show that under this regime the individual burn scars from dry season fires are smaller, and more old-growth vegetation survives. This is one key to providing the range for threatened species, which need specific kinds of cover at different times of the year.

But something else, something startling, lurks in this brief summation. Ecofire is government-funded: its first phase was financed by the commonwealth, and now the West Australian government is paying AWC about \$350,000 a year - 9c a hectare - to fire-manage the central Kimberley. Local pastoralists are putting their trust in a conservation not-for-profit to burn their land from the air.

The model emerging in the region is thus based on partnerships, coalitions of diverse interests aiming at a broad goal of plant and animal control at the landscape scale.

It is also one where AWC takes centre stage as manager. Fleming and his team have been pioneering new mechanisms for holding land.

In 2009 AWC struck a deal with Aboriginal pastoralist Frank Shadforth to lease 110,000ha of his Seven Emu property in the Gulf Country of the Northern Territory. This week they are unveiling another agreement to manage indigenous land: Tableland, the large Aboriginal-held pastoral lease adjoining Mornington.

The Yulumbu community on Tableland will receive a \$50,000 annual royalty for the next 45 years, and take up land management positions in the operation, while a small commercial cattle herd will be maintained in a fenced portion of the lease.

This is something of a seismic shift in the Aboriginal land politics of the Kimberley, where some 30 of the 100-odd pastoral stations are in indigenous hands.

It opens up the possibility that Aboriginal communities could increasingly choose to sub-lease their land for non-pastoral uses.

"We hope," says Fleming, in tactful, low-key fashion, "that it provides a model other indigenous communities can choose to replicate."

The Yulumbu partnership is the first such compact between an indigenous community and a non-government conservation group. In a sense, it brings a "privatised indigenous protected area" into being. It also highlights a drift away from the use of land for cattle in the north, where pastoral lease-holdings still dominate the map.

With the recent political crisis over the Indonesia live cattle trade, it may well be that the pastoral lease system will eventually come to seem an anachronism, or that pastoralism will emerge as simply one land use regime among many in the far north, rather than its mandated and undisputed cornerstone.

How to best exploit the region's vast land tracts remains an open question. Until now the only answers have been cattle, tourism, Aboriginal land trusts, mining and oil and gas. Conservation is a newer element, which introduces a new kind of accounting, a new way of assessing the land and its purpose. AWC's key figures like innovative ways of thinking these things through.

They speak not just of "natural capital," but region-scale "environmental health". Their narrow focus may be species preservation, but it implies a redesign of the political economy of the remote north, albeit in a very discreet way.

For lateral thinkers seeking a northern future that might be both viable and sustainable, a sketch-map of a new land-use system begins to shimmer into view: one that would involve continued pastoralism, land farming and local intensive settlement matched by a balanced portfolio of region-wide set-off reserves.

Strikingly, it seems that governmental custodians agree that the long-standing system of piecemeal management has failed. In the same time-frame as its assumption of control over Tableland station, AWC is cementing a most unusual deal with the West Australian government to extend its newly acquired sanctuary on pastoral land in the Artesian Range, west of Mornington, where some of the north's mammalian rarities endure.

AWC will also take over managerial responsibilities for the adjoining section of the range, a 37,000ha parcel held by the state Department of Environment and Conservation. This is the continent's first such public-private collaboration, with a non-profit group delivering conservation on public land.

Western Australia has just developed a \$63m Kimberley science and conservation strategy, of which this initiative will be part. Even for a state with deep pockets, the Kimberley is too much: hard, vast, somehow untamed.

In the candid view of Premier Colin Barnett, "the challenges are too great for government alone, which is why we work closely with landholders and other stakeholders".

In broad pattern, it seems plain the old methods of landholding are breaking down and similar fluidity is emerging across the savannah north, in the Territory and Cape York. What is the North for? How to manage it? New answers to these questions, more in tune with the interlocking patterns of the landscape itself, are beginning to take hold.