

# THE AUSTRALIAN

## Pastoralists give ground for conservation

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Atticus Fleming, CEO of Australian Wildlife Conservancy photographed on Mount Brennan, at Mornington Wildlife Sanctuary. Picture: Colin Murty Source: The Australian

**WHEN Atticus Fleming gazes out across the vast, ancient terrain of the Kimberley, he sees not only the dramatic beauty of the frontier landscape but also the most ambitious land and wildlife preservation project yet mounted in Australia's north.**

As the chief executive of the Australian Wildlife Conservancy, Mr Fleming controls or manages almost 900,000ha of peaks and valleys, gorges, escarpments and eucalypt-covered plains from the organisation's field headquarters at Mornington on the upper reaches of the Fitzroy River.

Once a vast cattle station, Mornington is now the jewel in the crown of the AWC - and it is here that a grand plan for the region is being implemented, a plan whose next step involves a partnership with the Aboriginal community just next door.

The tiny community of Yulmbu, holders of one of the north's great pastoral leases, has just done a deal to transfer management of the 350,000ha Tableland cattle property to the private wildlife conservation group.

This is the first time an indigenous community has sub-leased its land in this way to earn income out of conservation: the cattle will soon be removed from most of the station's country. It is a striking shift in the Kimberley's land-use pattern. It marks the end of a long-held dream, and, perhaps, the faint beginnings of something new.

Isolated and rugged, the Tableland spreads across the upper Fitzroy catchment. The Little Fitzroy river, shaded by paperbarks, flows right past the Yulmbu community, a scatter of houses, old and new. The dozen or so permanent residents among the family groups who hold the land live: they were too grief-stricken in the wake of a funeral to say much when The Weekend Australian called in last week.

But the dilemmas they have faced, and now resolved, are clear, and shared across much of the Aboriginal-held North Kimberley. Tableland station reaches for 120km up the Durack Ranges, along the Chamberlain river gorge, across broad plains of eucalypt. It has quite a back story.

The land was opened up for cattle in 1920 by a pioneer named Scotty Sadler, who was led there from Fitzroy Crossing through the ranges by an Aboriginal guide. That guide's son, Mick Jowalji, became the first horse-breaker and head stockman on the station: the local families stayed on the land, and after long struggles secured the pastoral lease. Jowalji, now 97 and a famous artist, lives nearby to this day.

The station has not prospered in the 18 years since the Yulmbu community secured its lease: the capital costs of running the station have proved too great. The community's members realised they were not succeeding in looking after their country. Now, says Yulmbu spokesman Wallace Midmee, that job can and will be done.

The Yulmbu community held long talks with AWC, which runs two adjoining pastoral properties. Yulmbu decided on a most unusual deal. They would sub-lease their 3000sq km of the Kimberley to AWC for 45 years, in return for an annual payment of \$50,000.

AWC would look after the land, burn it each year under a conservation-based fire regime, and fence off a little section to allow the running of a small cattle herd. Importantly, Yulmbu community members would be guaranteed a handful of permanent positions in land management. Their dreams would no longer be pastoral, but conservationist.

The West Australian government is firmly behind this new approach. It will support AWC's Kimberley projects, including the Yulmbu agreement, with \$2.1 million over three years - a novel, route to achieving public conservation goals. Environment Minister Bill Marmion said: "The Yulmbu partnership will be a groundbreaking model for conservation on indigenous land. It will bring together good science, practical land management and employment opportunities."

Almost 100 years after the land north of the King Leopold Ranges was opened up, and cattle were first placed there, it is the twilight of an era, and a strange new turn. Some 30 of the Kimberley's 100 vast cattle stations are held by Aboriginal groups, which operate them with varying degrees of success.

The Tableland sub-lease holds out the promise for Kimberley people of remaining on their land, while securing a modest income from it.