

ABORIGINAL STONE “MONUMENTS” IN THE KIMBERLEY

On 1 May 2019, Kimberley Society members **Mike Donaldson**, **Hamish McGlashan**, and **Mike Cusack** summarised the variety of stone structures or “monuments” that are prolific features of the Kimberley landscape.

Mike started proceedings with a summary of the main types of stone arrangements identified by the Reverend J.R.B. Love in a landmark paper published by the South Australian Museum in 1939:

- ❖ Remarkable natural features
- ❖ Monoliths, not heavier than one or two men could erect
- ❖ Groups of elongated or peculiar-looking stones
- ❖ Elaborate arrangements of stones, such as circles, parallel lines, ovals, or more intricate designs
- ❖ Cairns

Love showed clearly that it was impossible to interpret the meaning of a stone arrangement without first-hand knowledge from the Aboriginal group in whose territory it existed. Similar structures in different places had vastly different stories attached to them; standing stones at one site represented kangaroos that wrestled in the Dreamtime, whereas similar structures elsewhere marked where the Boobook Owl turned back the sea.



Standing stones, north Kimberley coast



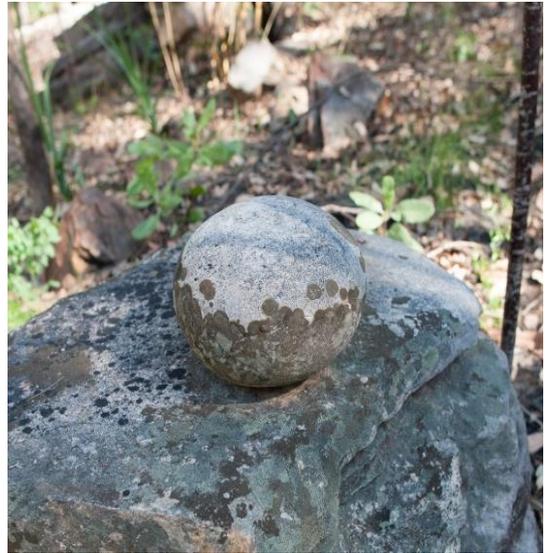
Idriess's Chanake Stone re-found

Hamish showed examples of monoliths encountered during bushwalks throughout the Kimberley, with particular emphasis on the Chanake Stone first described by Ion Idriess in his 1937 book *Over the Range*. Hamish was with a group that re-found this site in 2017, and again it was clear that without specific local Aboriginal knowledge there was no way the significance could be ascertained. Similar large standing stones were illustrated from other parts of the Kimberley and the Central Desert region where there was no knowledge of the sites meaning.

Mike Cusack followed with examples of ‘special stones’ including football-sized spherical boulders strategically placed on rock ‘altars’ near several waterfalls or rock art sites. He also showed examples of ‘signal’ stones, typically flat stones placed vertically near art, and examples of ‘retribution rings’ or ‘vendetta stones’ that typically surround a central mound of stones that once covered the body of an important person before the bones were cleaned, wrapped in paper bark, and placed in a cave of importance to the deceased person.



Placed boulders, Bachsten Creek



Placed boulder near mouth of Roe River



Marker stones at Roe River waterfall



'Retribution ring' and burial mound, Lawley River

Mike Donaldson again took the microphone and showed numerous examples of linear stone arrangements found across the Kimberley on tidal flats, bare flat rock platforms, and as parallel lines leading to some Wanjina rock art sites. There is documentation for some sites such as the Brockman Wanjina site near Manning Creek where Ian Crawford recorded that a parallel pathway of stones leading to the site was made by ants pursuing the Wandjina. Another ring of stones near Munja was said to be a Barramundi increase site. The spectacular Jarrgun stone arrangement near Munja is said to represent the way food is shared between the local people, and there is an informative sign at this locality describing this responsibility.



Stone pathway at Manning Creek Wanjina site



Stone arrangements on tidal flats, Scott Strait



Jarrgun stone arrangement near Munja

Large stone piles, up to a metre high and three metres long, comprising stones 30-50 centimetres in diameter, are also common across the Kimberley and although poorly documented, they are understood to be 'Sneezing Heaps' – piles accumulated as passers-by add stones to avoid 'sneezing sickness'.



Large 'Sneezing Heap', Charnley River

The presentation finished with some examples of similar stone arrangements from other parts of the country, including the Goldfields, Western Desert, and Arnhem Land.

Mike Donaldson