

THE PAST, THE PRESENT, AND THE FUTURE: Aboriginal cultural heritage in the Kimberley

On 4 April 2018, Kimberley legend Sam Lovell AM (pictured) gave a spirited address to the Society on his long-term involvement with our favourite place. The talk was originally scheduled for May 2017 but was postponed at short notice due to Sam's ill health. On the night, his jovial nature shone through, captivating the audience of 70 members and guests with his stories and sense of humour.



Sam was born at Calwinyarda (between the Fitzroy River and the Oscar Range) in 1933, taken from his family by authorities as a child of three as part of the Stolen Generation, and sent to the Moola Bulla Aboriginal settlement west of Halls Creek. He grew up immersed in Aboriginal culture and learned the Gija language of the area. As a young man Sam worked as a stockman on Kimberley cattle stations including Napier Downs, Mt House, Leopold Downs, and Gibb River.

During the evening Sam explained aspects of Kimberley Aboriginal culture including how, in creation times, human spirit beings travelled across the land creating sacred sites, giving different languages to people, and creating all the animals, plants and landforms. He noted that there are still 27 distinct Aboriginal languages in the Kimberley.

Sam also talked about Aboriginal people's complex system of family relations, where each person knows their kinship relationship and their country. These extended family relationships are the core of kinship systems and are central to the way society is organised and culture is passed on. Kinship systems define where a person fits in to the community, binding people together in relationships of sharing and obligation. He also stressed the importance of the initiation ceremony in the life of a young male Aboriginal, making him a man.

He talked about the Kimberley region as an area rich in food sources and abundant fresh water that enabled the original inhabitants to develop a rich cultural life. Sam learnt from experience and by reading books that the country offered tremendous sites of art, wildlife and scenery to share with tourists in a manner that would create work opportunities while maintaining many of the communities' traditional spiritual customs.

In the 1980s, he and his wife Rosita helped pioneer Indigenous tourism with Kimberley Safaris Tours. They conducted tours throughout the Kimberley, Northern Territory, Central Australia and Queensland for many years, sharing their knowledge of the bush and the country with tourists from Australia and all over the world. Kimberley Safari Tours provided cooking and camping facilities for Phil Playford's Geological Survey geological research trips to the Napier Range for many years.

Sam's extensive experience and the respect he gained working with Aboriginal people in the Kimberley allowed him to access remote Aboriginal sites and communicate with the many Aboriginal 'tribes'. His good reputation with non-Aboriginal people also led to him taking groups of scientists with younger Aboriginal members of communities to art and traditional sites. The combined efforts of Sam, to teach the Aboriginal side of site visits, and the scientists, to teach the research side, greatly contributes to the awareness of newer generations of Kimberley Aboriginal people in understanding and respecting the land. Sam wants to help his people to understand the value of what they have on country and how important it is to look after and keep the sites. He wants to see today's Aboriginal youth become rangers and custodians to avoid locking up such places so that people can

come to see them. He stressed that these culturally important sites must be managed so that they will still be worth seeing in hundreds of years to come.

Sam is also an enthusiastic musician and he travels across Australia every year to play at the Tamworth Country Music Festival. He explained that he learnt to play with mates who somehow had acquired a guitar. None of them could read music so they experimented with notes and strings to form the tune to accompany bush songs and ballads. Playing the guitar and singing bush ballads with mates living in the bush and on cattle stations meant a lot to them.

Despite his age (mid 80s), Sam believes that there is still much he can do. He admitted to getting frustrated if other Aboriginal people do not support, or show interest in, some of the programs and projects he is involved with. He sometimes thinks that perhaps he should retire and enjoy the quieter side of life, but then he thinks about others who need help. His motivation is to help people! Sam explained that his current responsibilities include providing on-site advice and practical assistance to Aboriginal clients involved in or proposing tourism activities, and assisting in negotiations and interpretation between Aboriginal people and government departments and tourism operators. All of which keep him very busy and actively involved in promoting the development of Aboriginal tourism in Western Australia.

Sam is the patron of the Western Australian Indigenous Tourism Operators Council, was awarded the Sir David Brand Award in 1988 for his contribution to tourism, and in 2003 received a Member of the Order of Australia medal (AM) for his services as a mentor to Indigenous groups and communities in the Kimberley region in developing tourism ventures. Further recognition exists in the naming of the Sam and Rosita Lovell Tourism Award, presented annually by the Kimberley Tourism Association.

Sam's passion and ambition to share his knowledge to help Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people was evident on the night at the Kimberley Society. Everyone present thoroughly enjoyed his talk and thanked him for being available so soon after recovering from illness.

Jeff Murray & Mike Donaldson