

Dating, understanding and appreciating the Aboriginal Rock Art of the Kimberley

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Munnurru public rock art site on Wunambal Gaambera Aboriginal Corporation land. Credit: Sven Ouzman

Australia is home to one of the world's great art treasures in the form of hundreds of thousands of rock art sites scattered throughout the country.

Unfortunately, most Australians have not had the privilege of visiting these special places. Such a visit radically expands a person's

understanding of Australian history as something that goes much, much deeper than our shallow, colonial roots of the last few hundred years.

To reinforce this broader understanding of identity and heritage, archaeologists, chemists, geologists, and physicists from the universities of Melbourne, Western Australia and Wollongong, Archae-Aus consultancy, and the Australian Nuclear Science and Technology Organisation launched a 3 year project across the Kimberley to date rock art using an astonishing variety of scientific techniques.

In 2014 the team was privileged to begin work along the King George River in Balangarra Country, and has continued this year along the coast of Dambimangari Country.

The work involves careful study of the rock art and its associated cultural context and then taking very small samples mostly of mineral crusts, mudwasp nests and organic material growing on rock surfaces, for laboratory analysis.

These materials may also degrade the art itself over time, so understanding their formation will help guide future conservation and management practices.

No rock art dates are available yet – though indications are that some rock art is very recent, while other rock art traditions may be tens of thousands of years old.

These dates will help demonstrate to the outside world the depth and range of Kimberley rock art, and build the case for it to be recognised with World Heritage Site status.

These dates also help disprove false claims that some Kimberley rock art was not made by Aboriginal people.

To properly date and understand Kimberley [rock art](#) will take many years, but the Rock Art Dating Project team are confident the results will help grow a national pride and respect for this intellectual and cultural achievement made and looked after by Aboriginal people.

Provided by Science Network WA

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