

Ochre mine paints ancient picture

July 8 2015, by Vivienne Brown



“We are committed to protecting and preserving our cultural heritage so that we can learn more about our ancestors and pass this knowledge on to our children and grandchildren” Wajarri Traditional Owner Colin Hamlett says. Credit: Duncan Wright

Since 2007 Wajarri Traditional Owners have collaborated with UWA archaeologists to explore the unique cultural heritage of the Mid West's Weld Range, most recently as part of the Weld Range Web of Knowledge project.

The Weld Range is a 60km-long series of Banded Iron Formation ridges where the nationally heritage listed Wilgie Mia ochre mine lies.

Wilgie Mia was created when the ancestral marlu (red kangaroo) was speared on the coast of Kalbarri. As he travelled east, his blood formed ochre deposits throughout the Mid West.

Finally, in the Weld Range, he died forming Wilgie Mia. The spiritual potency, quality and abundance of the dark red pigment mined at this site drew Aboriginal people from across WA for trade and exchange, ceremony and ritual.

The importance of Wilgie Mia is reflected in the abundant and varied archaeological records of the local area, containing artefact scatters, stone arrangements, ochre sources, painted rockshelters, ancient gathering places and locations of historic events.

These places present a rare insight into past lifeways, communication, trade and marriage networks as well as the underlying cosmology of a living culture.

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Breakaway Caves, Weld Range 2009 Credit: Duncan Wright

"The work we do is also important to Australians, particularly future generations. When I was at school they were teaching us about other country's culture and language—but people in Australia should be learning about Australia and the history of traditional Aboriginal people."

Recent excavations at one of the rock shelters has provided the first scientific evidence that Aboriginal people have lived there for more than 30,000 years.

This creates important questions about the role of Wilgie Mia ochre over this long period and provides the potential to investigate how ancient Wajarri people managed during the dramatic climate changes since that time.

"As you excavate you see the layers with fire and artefacts. The sort of stuff you learn about our ancestors is mind blowing and we only went down 40cm." Wajarri Traditional Owner Brendan Hamlett says.

Wajarri insight has also proved crucial in archaeological interpretations.

"The Wajarri Traditional Owners at Weld have made me more aware of the whole landscape and its resources when thinking about archaeological sites," project Research Director Dr Vicky Winton says.

"Often, the resources around a site, such as a nearby waterhole or a grove of a particular type of tree, are as important for understanding past Aboriginal life as the archaeological remains found within the site alone."

Provided by Science Network WA

Citation: Ochre mine paints ancient picture (2015, July 8) retrieved 9 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2015-07-ochre-ancient-picture.html>

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