

Landscapes: the Journal of the International Centre for Landscape and Language

Volume 2 | Issue 3

Article 3

2013

On the Kimberley Coast: Broome, North Western Australia

Elaine Rabbitt

Recommended Citation

Rabbitt, E. (2004). On the Kimberley Coast: Broome, North Western Australia. *Landscapes: the Journal of the International Centre for Landscape and Language*, 2(3).

Retrieved from <http://ro.ecu.edu.au/landscapes/vol2/iss3/3>

This Article (refereed) is posted at Research Online.

<http://ro.ecu.edu.au/landscapes/vol2/iss3/3>

ELAINE RABBITT

On the Kimberley Coast: Broome, North Western Australia

The town of Broome on the Kimberley coast of North Western Australia is world renowned for the production of fine pearls and tantalising Cable Beach. It has a history of attracting people to the coast. At the turn of the 20th Century, Broome was a thriving pearling port that drew investors and crewmembers from around the world. Now it has become a popular tourist destination for both national and international visitors.

The expansion of the tourism industry from the 1980s to current times has changed and increased the use of the beach. Beach-side leisure activities have had an impact on the beach. Changes and responses to the use of the beaches around Broome are considered.

The Kimberley Coast

The Kimberley is Western Australia's northern region and comprises one sixth of the state's landmass. The region covers an area of 421,451 square kilometres, which is approximately the size of France. It is in close proximity to Indonesia and Asia. The Kimberley is bordered by the Arafura Sea to the north, the Timor Sea to the west, the Indian Ocean to the south west, the Great Sandy Desert to the south and the Northern Territory to the east. Broome, the largest Kimberley town, is situated on Roebuck Bay, approximately 2,200 kilometres north of Perth and 1,800 kilometres south west of Darwin.

The Traditional Owners

The coastal area, Gularabulu, "the coast where the sun goes down" (Roe, 1983, p. i) refers to the country along the coast now known as the Kullarri region. This includes Bidyadanga (formerly La Grange Mission), the traditional lands of the Yawuru and Jugun peoples (now known as Broome town area) and Dampierland, a peninsula north of Broome (Roe; Yu, 1992). The country known as the Dampier Peninsula is the traditional country of the Bard, Jawi, Nyul Nyul,

Djabber, Djabber and Nimanburu peoples (Benterrak, Muecke & Roe 1984). There are variations in the spelling of the names of the different groups of people (Tindale, 1974).

Background

The establishment of the town of Broome in 1883, was unlike other remote towns in Western Australia or Australia. It was established primarily as the land base for the sea based pearling industry on the shores of Roebuck Bay. Ambitious explorers arriving overland realised the potential of harvesting pearl shell in the area now known as Broome, after noticing that the local Indigenous people wore pearl shell ornaments (Bain, 1982). Pastoralists, pearlers, adventurers and opportunists of all kinds were lured to the region by the prospect of making money. In the ideology of these European colonisers the area represented, the opportunity for growth, development and social mobility. They set up their camps along the shoreline and in the sand dunes.

Broome became an international 'hub' of activity as the pearling industry was established. The industry was reliant on direct links to Singapore. The Blue Funnel Line was a shipping service that made a regular port of call to Broome with these labourers and provisions (Rabbitt, 1991, p. 14).

In 1888, the Eastern Extension Australasia and the China Telegraph Company laid an international underwater telegraph cable between Broome and Java. This provided access to overseas communication between Broome and the imperial capital London (Burton, 2000). Broome received news from London before the rest of Australia. The establishment and maintenance of these links were driven by the need for information on the price of pearl shell on the world market. These international connections overshadowed associations with Perth, the administrative centre, 2,200 kilometres south.

Broome was the largest settlement in the north of Western Australia (Praagh, 1904). This was at the height of the pearling industry, when 403 pearling vessels were registered and working off the coast of Broome. Broome had become the world's largest and most affluent pearling centre (Broome Museum,

n.d). The Asian divers, particularly the Japanese, were considered to hold the intellectual capital underpinning the industry (Schaper, 1995).

A century later, Broome is an abundant coastal community, with international repute. The town is riding on a wave of investment, as the area's wealth of natural attractions including Cable Beach lure more and more visitors each year. Cable Beach was declared WA's Most Popular Beach and WA's Best Beach (Broome Advertiser. 8th April, 2004).

This paper investigates the ways the beach has been used to promote tourism and how the industry has changed Broome and the use of the shoreline. A synopsis of events from the early 1980s to current is given to illustrate how Broome has become the thriving regional services centre, pearling port and tourist town it is today. Rather than attempt a detailed analysis, which is beyond the scope of this paper, a selection of examples is given to demonstrate how 'beach usage' has influenced the town's development. Extensive references are provided throughout the paper.

The natural beauty of the Kimberley Coast has enticed unprecedented investment in the town of Broome and the tourist industry. The 1980s heralded the transition of Broome from a small and isolated country coastal port to a thriving international tourist destination by the end of the 20th Century. Broome underwent rapid growth and social change that has continued to steadily spiral.

Broome became a destination for an increasing number of women and men from all walks of life. Developments such as the sealing of the Great Northern Highway between Broome and Port Hedland in 1982 prepared the way for a growing residential population and the tourism industry.

Broome was now more accessible. Cable Beach was marketed as an ultimate travel destination and new developments were being undertaken. The original Cable Beach land division was designed to facilitate agricultural pursuits and was rezoned to accommodate a variety of tourist and residential uses.

Broome became known as 'The Gateway' to the Kimberley, 'Pearl of the North'

or 'Pearl Coast'. It is only one and a half hours' flying time north to Bali, Indonesia. The nearest town is Derby, a smaller centre approximately 240 kilometres to the north east.

The town became the major centre for providing the infrastructure for the growing Kimberley economy. The opportunity for employment and investment coupled with the attractions of the landscape and climate resulted in the building boom of the 1980s. The town's population doubled from 3,000 to 6,000 in the decade between 1976 and 1986 (Shire of Broome, 1989).

Topography

The Kimberley terrain is vast; rugged in some areas and flat in others. Features of the coastal terrain, particularly in the Broome area, include white, sandy beaches, mangrove swamps and the azure and/or grey seas. The 11-metre tidal range significantly affects the coastal environment. It has "an important influence on the types of plants, marine animals and birds to be found" (Kenneally, Edinger & Willing, 1996, p. 11). There is an abundance of fish and seafood delicacies.

The tide influences opportunities for coastal recreation. High tide may bring cooling westerly winds but very high tides may also bring the discomfort of insects such as sand flies. Local knowledge of the tides, creeks and coastline create many opportunities for fishing. Low tide brings the exposure of the reefs and the opportunity to gather seafood. Beach activities are planned according to the tide.

The Climate

The climate is tropical, with "two significant seasons [the 'wet' and the 'dry'] separated by brief transitional periods" (Kenneally, Edinger & Willing, 1996, p. 5). Indigenous concepts of the seasonal patterns are more complex than the western, dualistic model of wet and dry. Indigenous seasons are recognised according to variations in wind and rainfall patterns, and the abundance of plant and animal food from the land (Kenneally et al. p. 7).

Winter, from May until September, is commonly referred to as the dry season. The major weather features are clear blue skies and comfortable night and day temperatures, ranging from an average of 15 degrees to 32 degrees celsius. At this time the sea is azure blue.

One of the major attractions attributed to the growth of Broome compared to other north west centres is the town's proximity to the sea. Prevailing sea breezes keep the temperatures in the Broome area lower than other towns north or south of Broome. These conditions and the white, sandy beaches make Broome an attractive recreational centre for swimming and fishing in relatively safe waters.

In contrast to the cool, dry weather is the hot, dry build up to the wet season from late September, through October, November and early December. This season features mostly clear blue skies with rare storms later in the season. Monthly temperatures range from the mid 20s to over 40 degrees celsius.

The wet season from December to April features cloud cover and cyclonic skies as well as hot and humid days. The humidity builds up with the onset of monsoonal rain in the latter part of the season and at times brings cyclone activity (Shire of Broome, 1995, p. 26). The temperature ranges from the high 20s to the low 30s. At this time of the year the sea is often rough and debris is washed ashore. Would be swimmers are warned of the dangers of being stung by the box jellyfish.

The McAlpine Era

In 1981, Lord Alistair McAlpine of West Great Britain came to Broome for a holiday. Similar to the opportunists who arrived in the Kimberley a century earlier, he had a vision for the future of Broome and the region. He recognised the potential of the area as an unspoilt holiday destination with white sandy beaches and on the edge of the Indian Ocean. McAlpine began to buy properties and formed the Broome Preservation Society and restored and

refurbished old Broome buildings to their former splendour.

By the mid 1980s business was flourishing in Broome and the influx of people taking up investment opportunities created employment prospects for job seekers. This accounted for the increasing estimated resident population base. The building industry was flourishing and there was a demand for land to be released for sale. The arrival of a greater number of people such as builders and tradespeople, tourists and tourist operators put pressure on the existing services and indicated the need for new facilities.

A real turning point for the development of the Cable Beach area was the opening of McAlpine's Cable Beach Club in 1988. It was Broome's first 'Club Med' style resort overlooking Cable Beach. Built on 10ha, 'The Club' offers luxurious facilities and tropical surroundings to guests. This includes opulent suites and bungalows furnished with Asian antiques and collectable Australian artworks. Swimming pools, tennis courts, restaurants and a health centre are other sources of entertainment offered to guests. Down on the beach, 'Club' guests are provided with a deck chair, beach umbrella, towel, sun cream and water as part of their idyllic holiday package.

Another important tourist development at Cable Beach at this time was the opening of McAlpine's world-class zoo. Featuring exotic animals from around the world he began a breeding programme. McAlpine's zoo and Australian bush identity Malcolm Douglas' crocodile farm in the same area were major tourist attractions.

Tour operators were granted licences for other beach hire equipment such as catamarans, jet ski and sea/air ballooning. The beach car park was redesigned and a paved vehicular access was made available for easy access to the beach.

With mixed community support the Broome Surf Club Rooms were built on top of the sand dunes at Cable Beach in 1989. The Surf Club runs beach surveillance and rescue as well as training programmes. Being in such a prime

location the club rooms are often hired out for functions and the bar is open on the weekends.

Another popular introduced feature of Cable Beach and a major tourist attraction are the camel rides. Camel tour operators take groups of tourist on beach walks. The sunset ride is the most popular and the camels wear taillights attached to their tails to prevent a beach collision with a 4wd after dark. Camel operators are only permitted to conduct camel rides heading north along the beach. The area was proclaimed a nude beach in liberal days gone by.

Broome Shire Rangers control the use of the beach, in particular the movement of traffic on the northern end of Cable Beach or the 'nude' beach. Vehicles are permitted on the beach under strict speed controls.

The National pilot's strike of 1989 crippled the Kimberley and in particular the town of Broome. Traditionally, business investors had to rely on the prosperous 'dry season' to carry them through the often unprofitable 'wet season'. Thousands of visitors were expected that year and did not arrive; the town's economy was depressed. Businesses failed and land prices dropped temporarily, so that investment capital was either lost or withdrawn:

Broome entered the 1990s in a depressed state. McAlpine closed his zoo, his pearl harvest did not reach expected yields, and he sold the Cable Beach Club and the majority of his investment interests in the town. His private jet was no longer sighted at the Broome airport and his residence in Broome, was transformed into 'boutique accommodation' for the upmarket tourist.

After a decade of massive economic growth the slump of the early 1990s was a huge blow to the community. The town's economy had changed dramatically. This was further compounded with the closing of the Broome Meatworks in 1994. This was an end of an era in Broome. As a major industry it had provided employment for 'locals' and seasonal workers and had boosted the town's economy (Broome Museum, n.d. Meatworks folder).

Tourism

Investor optimism driven by the tourist industry was soon recovered and has subsequently influenced all aspects of Broome's culture. At the end of 1995 it was recommended to Council that the old meatworks site on the shore of Roebuck Bay be rezoned 'prestigious resort development', encouraging garden and pool settings fronting the beach. Resort development did not take place. Rather, the area has become a prestigious residential precinct where homeowners vie for the panoramic views of the Bay.

The irony was the meatworks end of town was not considered to be a prestigious development area by 'locals' and long-term residents, despite its proximity to and views of Roebuck Bay and Town Beach. This was due to the stench of the slaughtered cattle at the meat works. Furthermore, the foreshore adjacent the old meatworks site is culturally and historically significant to some local Broome groups and families. Some Indigenous people had lived in camps on this foreshore in the past. This section of the foreshore remains a popular spot for picnics and fishing, cooking seafood and overnight camping. "These people are often members of the lower socio-economic groupings, do not own automobiles to enable them to travel to other locations, and often have to walk to the area as their only means of getting there" (Dureau, 1995).

By the mid 1990s Broome was one of Western Australia's top tourist destinations. It was promoted on a national basis as a tropical paradise with natural unspoilt beaches. Broome and its community were changing. The topic of 'change' and 'developmental changes' to the town of Broome is a complex one. Development is a problematic term, used in a variety of contexts to mean different things. To some 'development' is progress and is inevitable, to others it is change and differences. "In the Australian context [development] invariably refers to a process whereby the material well-being of a population (national, state, regional community) is improved" (Altman, 1988, p. 8). It implies change and progress which have an amalgam of meanings based on individual perceptions.

Over the years bodies such as the State Government and the Broome Shire Council have undertaken numerous studies to ascertain and plan the changing direction and development of Broome. These include the Broome Study, 1989; Broome Planning Strategy, 1993; Coastal Park Management Plan, Broome, 1998 and the Cable Beach Development Plan, 2002, Broome 2004). These reports are a useful reference for understanding the transformation of Broome into a highly sort after seaside tourist destination and one of Australia's fastest growing country towns (Salt, 2001, p.151).

Cultural and environmental issues have been raised within the community in regard to the use of Cable Beach. In a bid to protect the beach a coastal park area has been defined. The Coastal Park extends northwards from Gantheume Point (Minyurr) for approximately 7 km along the coast to an area south of the Cable Beach tourist node and extends eastwards to Gantheume Point Rd, Gubinge Rd and Cable Beach Rd West" (Griffiths, 1998, p. 6).

Within the Coastal Park adjoining the north west side of Cable Beach area lies Hidden Valley. The area has been identified in the 1997 Local Government Development Program as a significant area to Aboriginal culture both past and present and is now protected under the Coastal Parks.

Of growing concern is the amount of traffic, 'north of the rocks' on Cable Beach. This includes cars, both 2wd and 4wd, buses and taxis as well as the popular camel teams. Debates between community beach users, tourist operators and the Broome Shire Council are ongoing (www.broome.wa.gov.au/pdf/media/vehicles_on_beach.html).

Broome as a coastal town continues to be on a spiralling course of expansion and development. As the population of Broome has continued to steadily grow, so too has the demand for services and facilities. This increased need has led to expansion in the building industry, shops and traffic. This trend compares to Salt's (2001) findings that there is an overall population shift across Australia. Australian values in the latter half of the 20th Century embraced the beach as a lifestyle. "Lifestyle towns are really a product of the 20th Century and result from

the fact that Australians are increasingly choosing to move to towns for lifestyle reasons (Salt, 2001, p. 176).

Residential and commercial land in Broome, and in particular the beach area locations, are fetching exorbitant prices. Land is being cleared and released rapidly in a bid to keep pace with the current building trend in Broome.

The idea of Broome being classified as a remote destination is outdated. It is a clean, modern tourist town offering a broad range of services and facilities. These include direct flights to the eastern states and other parts of Western Australia, all levels of accommodation, numerous tours, local markets, arts, crafts and entertainment. It is also a centre and meeting place for Indigenous people living on communities and outstations, and for other community members from stations and outposts who come to town for supplies, business and medical attention.

The town's growth as an international tourist centre has led to an expansion in services, facilities and population numbers. The resident population continues to increase with new housing areas being established. The development of the tourist industry that draws thousands of national and international visitors annually has ensured Broome has reclaimed its place on the world stage. Once again Broome and its famous beaches take centre stage in Western Australia. Benefits such as employment, education and training opportunities have come with development. Yet, this expansion has been at a cost to the Broome community. Land is no longer affordable to many local families. The safety and security of living in a small community, where people know one another is changing.

Bibliography

- Altman, Jon (1988). *Aborigines, tourism, and development: The Northern Territory experience*. Darwin: Australian National University, Northern Australia Research Unit.
- Bain, Mary Albertus (1982). *Full fathoms five*. Perth: Artlook.
- Benterrak, Krim, Muecke, Stephen, & Roe, Paddy (1984). *Reading the country: Introduction to nomadology*. Fremantle: Fremantle Arts Press.
- Broome Advertiser* (8th April, 2004). 'Cable Beach is WA's best', p. 1.
- Broome Museum Notes (n.d.). *Pearling folders, 1-2*. Broome: Broome Museum.
- Broome Museum (n.d.) *Meatworks folder*. Broome: Broome Museum.
- Burton, Val (2000), General history of Broome. Broome, WA: Broome Historical Society.
- Dureau, David (1995, December). Submission to the Broome Shire Council on Town Planning Scheme 2, Amendment 122).
- Griffiths, Sharon (1998). Coastal park management plan Broome, Western Australia. Broome: Shire of Broome.
- Kenneally, Kevin F., Choules Edinger, Daphne, & Willing, Tim (1996). *Broome and beyond plants and people of the Dampier Peninsula, Kimberley, Western Australia*. Perth: Department of Conservation & Land Management
- Praagh, Lionel, & Lloyd, Reginald (1904). *The great Nor-West and a chapter in history of WA*. Perth: E.S. Wigg & Son.
- Rabbitt, Elaine (1991, August). Piece of the past. *The Broome Bulletin*, p.14.
- Roe, Paddy (1983). *Gularabulu: Stories from the West Kimberley*. Fremantle: Fremantle Arts Centre Press.
- Salt, Brain (2001). *The big shift: Welcome to the third Australian culture*. South Yarra, Victoria: Hardie Grant Books.
- Schaper, Michael (1995). The Broome race riots. In Jan Gothard (Ed.), *Asian orientations studies in Western Australian history*, 16 (pp. 112-132). Perth: University of Western Australia.
- Shire of Broome (1989). *The Broome study*. Broome: Broome Shire Council.
- Shire of Broome (1995). *Shire directory*. Broome: Magnolia Associates.
- Shire of Broome, www.broome.wa.gov.au/pdf/media/vehicles_on_beach.html).
- SMEC Australia Pty Ltd (2002). *Cable Beach development plan*. Perth: SMEC.
- Tindale, Norman, B. (1974). *Aboriginal tribes of Australia*. Berkley: University of California Press.
- Yu, Sarah (1992). *Town by the bay: A social history of Broome*. Broome: Jawa.

Elaine Rabbitt is the Co-ordinator of Edith Cowan University's Kurongkurl Katitjin Broome Regional Centre. The Centre is a School of Indigenous Australian Studies where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students are provided with the opportunity to undertake university studies in a country region. Elaine has lived and worked in the north west of Western Australia for most of her life and spends considerable time researching Kimberley history and collecting oral histories. She is also involved in the development of training initiatives for students in remote localities.