

# RGS-IBG Field Research Programmes

Royal  
Geographical  
Society  
with IBG

Advancing geography  
and geographical learning

- Kimberley Research Project
- Western Australia
- 1988

**A British-Australian multidisciplinary research project to the Kimberley region of north-western Australia.**

Joint project between the Royal Geographical Society  
and the Linnean Society of London, in co-operation  
with the Government of Western Australia.

*Patron:* HRH The Duke of Kent

*Leader:* Professor Andrew Goudie, Department of Geography, University of Oxford

*Deputy Leader:* Dr. Martin Sands, Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew  
*Australian Director of Operations:* David Pascoe

Number of members: 35

Duration: April-July 1988

The Kimberley region of Western Australia is a wild, sparsely populated and under-researched area into which access is often difficult. Lying between the Great Sandy Desert in the south and the humid, forested coastline of the Timor Sea to the north, it encompasses a great variety of habitats. Among these is one of the most striking areas of limestone terrain and deeply dissected sandstone in the world.

1988 marked the bicentenary of both the Linnean Society of London, the oldest biological society in the world, and the establishment of the first European settlement in Australia. To celebrate these two anniversaries, a joint British-Australian scientific project was organised to the Napier, Oscar and King Leopold Ranges in the heart of the Kimberley.

The objectives of the project were to:

- (a) Field research in an exciting and little-known wilderness area and a key wet-dry tropical region;
- (b) create an opportunity for collaborative work between Australian and British scientists and thereby foster an improved and lasting liaison;
- (c) prepare a series of educational publications and videos as a important legacy to the project;
- (d) involve young Australians in environmental awareness through direct field participation as part of an organised educational activity.

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(e) promote an increased awareness, nationally and internationally, of the Kimberley as an area of outstanding interest and natural beauty;

A research camp, 'Qantasbase', with accommodation for 30 people, was constructed with equipment provided by the Australian Defence Force at Police Camp Pool on the Lennard River, 120 km from the nearest local town of Derby. It proved to be a convenient starting point for exploration of the ranges.

Here the Anglo-Australian team worked closely with the local Bunaba people in their tribal lands. Amid a landscape which is perhaps one of the oldest in the world, the geomorphologists studied the age and climatic history of the area by analysing cave deposits, the role of organisms, the age of sand dunes, the stability of slopes, the flood history of the great gorges that cut through the ranges, and the rate at which the land-surface is being denuded by the heavy tropical storms during the wet season.

The life scientists collected field data and studied plant and animal species which will add considerably to the knowledge of the flora and fauna in the region. Particular attention was paid to several groups such as fungi, lichens, and bryophytes about which very little was previously known in the Kimberley. Several plant groups, as well as snails, damselflies, small mammals and bats were among the topics for specialised study. An investigation of the nutritional value of Aboriginal food plants was also undertaken to evaluate the viability of selected species as cultivated crops.

**Major sponsors included:**

Corporate Patrons: Mitsubishi Motors and Qantas airline., and sponsors: the Australian Defence Force, Ansett W.A., Australian Geographic Society, Barclays Bank plc, Esmee Fairbairn Foundation, the Royal Botanic Gardens Kew, The Royal Society, NERC and the National Geographic Society.

**Further reading:**

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