

Camooweal Caves National Park Management Statement 2013

Park size:	13,800ha
Bioregion:	North West Highlands
QPWS region:	Central
Local government estate/area:	Mount Isa City Council
State electorate:	Mount Isa



Rough-tailed goanna is considered to be the 'boss' for the Camooweal Caves National Park. Photo NPRSR

Legislative framework

✓	<i>Aboriginal Cultural Heritage Act 2003</i>
✓	<i>Environment Protection Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999</i>
✓	<i>Land Act 1994</i>
✓	<i>Nature Conservation Act 1992</i>
✓	<i>Wild Rivers Act 2005</i>

Plans and agreements

✓	China–Australia Migratory Bird Agreement
✓	Japan–Australia Migratory Bird Agreement

Thematic strategies

✓	Level 1 Fire Management Strategy Draft
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Vision

The Department of National Parks, Recreation, Sport and Racing's Queensland Parks and Wildlife Service (QPWS), in conjunction with the Indjalandji-Dhidhanu people, the Traditional Owners of the area, aim to restore and protect the natural and cultural values and to provide safe sustainable, nature based recreation and commercial tourism opportunities.

Conservation purpose

Camooweal Caves National Park of 13,800ha was initially gazetted on 23 January 1988 under the *National Park and Wildlife Act 1975*. It is approximately 24km south of Camooweal in north-western Queensland and 188km north-west of the city of Mount Isa and 14km east of the Northern Territory border.

Camooweal Caves National Park is important for the Indjalandji-Dhidhanu People who have dreamtime legends associated with the area, in particular the waterholes, rivers, sinkholes and caves.

The Camooweal Caves are extensive cavern systems developed beneath the flat surface of the Barkly Tableland in the vicinity of Camooweal township. The park was established to provide representation of these more broadly occurring geological features.

Camooweal Caves National Park is now managed to conserve and present a representative section of the Barkly Tablelands bioregion, as well as the dolomite underground cave systems.

Protecting and presenting the park's values

Landscape

Camooweal Caves National Park, on the semi-arid Barkly Tablelands, is characterised by open eucalypt woodland, spinifex, turpentine wattle shrubland and parts of the extensive Mitchell grass plains.

The park was gazetted to protect some of the unusual dolomite formations scattered throughout the area including the Great Nowranie Cave and Little Nowranie Cave. The caves themselves are sinkholes in the ground where water has percolated through 500 million year-old layers of soluble dolomite to create caverns linked by vertical shafts up to 75m deep.

Waterways, waterholes and geological formations on the Camooweal Caves National Park are a significant part of the natural and cultural landscape. Nowranie Creek on Camooweal Caves National Park joins the declared Georgina River south of Camooweal and contributes to the valuable hydrological, riparian and corridor functions towards maintaining the wild riverine ecologies.

Regional ecosystems

Six of the eight regional ecosystems present on Camooweal Caves National Park are listed as of concern (Table 1). A mosaic of eucalypt woodlands covers the largest proportion of the park. Regional ecosystems here provide significant sub-regional fauna habitat due to the number and size of trees with hollows.

The silver box woodland, coolabah and river red gum riparian woodland that grow along Nowranie Creek are areas of high fauna diversity.

Gidgee forest is not well represented on the protected area estate in the North West Highlands and only small patches are present on the Camooweal Caves National Park.

Vine thickets on dolomite outcrops surrounding the sinkholes are of critical value due to the fleshy fruited soft wood species that form islands in the surrounding woodland and grassland. Low intensity, early dry season fires in the surrounding woodland vegetation will remove fuel and prevent scorching of vine thicket species.

Native plants and animals

Camooweal Caves National Park contains four species of conservation significance.

The seasonal waterholes attract waterbirds including spoonbills, cormorants, herons and ducks. The freckled duck *Stictonetta naevosa* is a threatened wetland species that prefers quiet freshwater lagoons, and swampy grassland.

Ghost bats *Macroderma gigas*, orange leaf-nosed bats *Rhynonictoris aurantia* and other insect-eating bats roost in the caves. Owls also roost in these caves feeding on small nocturnal mammals like the long-haired rat *Rattus villosissimus*. The eastern edge of the orange leaf-nosed bat distribution extends into the Camooweal area. Foraging occurs in a range of habitats including grassland, open woodland and spinifex covered hills.

Camooweal Caves National Park is likely to be at the southern extent of the near threatened Carpentaria grasswren *Amytornis dorotheae* habitat. Careful management of fire is required to ensure sufficient mature spinifex (>5 years).

Aboriginal culture

The traditional country of the Indjalandji-Dhidhanu People includes the Camooweal Caves National Park and the Georgina River's eastern tributaries including Nowranie Creek. Native Title was determined for the Indjalandji-Dhidhanu People at a Federal Court hearing in Camooweal in December 2012.

Camooweal Caves National Park is associated with, and traversed by, a number of Aboriginal Dreamings that are actively respected by the Indjalandji-Dhidhanu People. Wiliyan-ngurru Dreaming is the "main Dreaming" for the park, where the rough-tailed goanna is considered to be the 'boss' for the Camooweal Caves.

Many of these sites have formally been recorded with consulting anthropologists and archaeologists over the past two decades. The majority of these sites have, to date, not been recorded on Queensland or Federal cultural heritage databases or registers, and are not widely known.

The limestone caves (sinkholes) within the park, including Little and Great Nowranie Caves and a number of other larger and smaller sinkholes are important Aboriginal sites of significance. The cave located within Nowranie Creek itself (Spinifex Cave) is a sacred site of high importance to the Indjalandji-Dhidhanu People.

The two semi-permanent waterholes that form part of Nowranie Creek (one located at the current camping ground, the other just east of the location at which the Urandangi Road crosses Nowranie Creek) are significant sites in this dry and often harsh environment. Aboriginal burial sites, camping sites, quarries and artefact distribution sites are known to be present on this park.

Shared-history culture

The first colonial explorer officially to record the Georgina River at Camooweal was William Landsborough who, during his search for Burke and Wills in 1861, named Lakes Mary, Francis and Kenellan (now spelt as 'Canellan').

The first settler to the area was John Sutherland, who took up the Rockland's lease in 1865.

Camooweal Caves National Park was once part of Rocklands Pastoral Holding and is now a neighbour. When the then owners of Rocklands transferred the Camooweal Caves National Park section of the pastoral holding, it retained the rights to continue grazing the property under a 30-year lease agreement with the State (due to expire October 2020).

The old Nowranie homestead was located on the park at the south-west boundary on Nowranie Creek.

Tourism and visitor opportunities

Nine commercial operators have commercial activity permits that allow them to visit the Camooweal Caves National Park. The focus of these operations is day-trips to visit Great Nowranie and Little Nowranie Caves on guided tours. Group sizes are currently up to 34 people at any one time. Commercial use varies from twice a month to four times per year. Two groups have permission to camp at Nowranie Waterhole—one group is allowed twice per week for 68 people and the other group twice per year for 22 people.

The park provides one picnic area beside the Nowranie Waterhole where waterbirds and woodland species can be seen at different times of the year. A shelter and picnic tables are provided. There is a short walking track to the Greater and Little Nowranie Cave sites. The edge of these sinkholes does not have protective bollards or guard rails and visitors need to exercise caution at these sites.

Access to within the caves is via deep vertical sinkholes and is only possible for people experienced in caving and properly equipped for vertical descents and exits.

The Indjalandji-Dhidhanu People are concerned with the use of the caves for recreational and/or training purposes. It is evident that some large rocks around the sinkhole mouths have been worked free and allowed to crash into the caves as deliberate acts of vandalism.

Education and science

Camooweal Caves National Park provides an opportunity for Mount Isa and Camooweal schools to visit a national park and the students to gain an appreciation of the area's significant geological and cultural values.

Detailed pre-visit information about Camooweal Caves National Park is available via the QPWS website and visitor guides, and through tourist information centres in other towns.

The cave environments at Camooweal offer the opportunity to research modern fauna history. Owl pellets and other fauna remains which have fallen or washed into the cave are often preserved. Other research projects will be encouraged for the Camooweal Caves National Park including fire management, and pest management.

Partnerships

The State and Dugalanji Aboriginal Corporation have developed an Indigenous Land Use Agreement (ILUA) for the exercising of native title rights and interests on the park. Dugalanji Aboriginal Corporation is currently contracted by the State to undertake a range of works within the park including maintenance and construction activities as well as the protection of sacred sites. The Traditional Owners have significant capacity to undertake management activities within the park.

Neighbourly relations are maintained in line with QPWS policy in regard to pest and fire management, fencing and grazing. The proactive maintenance of a working relationship with Rocklands is of particular interest in the lead up to finalisation of their grazing interests.

Other key issues and responses

Pest management

Pest plant species on the park includes Jerusalem thorn *Parkinsonia aculeata*. Buffel grass *Cenchrus pennisetiformis* is also invading the low open-woodlands and changing its floristics.

Pest animals occurring on park include cane toads *Rhinella marina* and cats *Felis catus*. Pest animals have the potential to have a large impact on the native animals in this park, particularly the bat species that are confined to sinkholes.

Feral pigs *Sus scrofa* are found within the area during wetter periods and feral camels *Camelus dromedarius* may occur from time to time.

Fire management

Camooweal Caves National Park has a draft Level 1 fire management strategy that will be further developed in collaboration with the Dugalanji Aboriginal Corporation and neighbours.

The variability in rainfall in a semi-arid environment greatly influences the area's proneness to fire. A rolling fire program of planned burns is undertaken if conditions are appropriate. Early storms bring lightning strikes in October and November that can sometimes trigger wildfires. Fire regimes should aim to promote a mosaic landscape where early dry season fires reduce available and continuous fuel, and fire frequency intervals are sufficiently spaced to allow several years of seed production between burns.

Other management issues

Grazing

A long-term lease for grazing purposes over Camooweal Caves National Park was issued in 1990 under the *Land Act 1975*. It will expire on 21 October 2020. The lease was part of an agreement to transfer the land for the national park from the neighbouring pastoral holding. Fencing programs assist in keeping cattle away from sensitive areas such as the sinkholes, but impacts still occur to creeks and other vulnerable areas.

Management directions

Desired outcomes	Actions and guidelines
<p>Landscape</p> <p>Landscape values are protected and changes in the landscape are managed to maintain their natural and cultural integrity.</p> <p>The health and integrity of watercourses, perennial springs, groundwater and catchments is maintained.</p>	<p>A1. Protect the integrity of sinkhole entrances and prevent contamination of the cave systems.</p> <p>A2. Maintain existing cleared areas required for firebreaks and roads where necessary.</p> <p>A3. Map the locations of all known springs and important water bodies and monitor their condition.</p>
<p>Natural values</p> <p>Protect ecosystem integrity, habitats and species of conservation significance through understanding and acting on threats.</p>	<p>A4. Protect cave entrance and riparian vegetation as critical habitat corridors.</p> <p>A5. Continue fauna monitoring, in particular focusing on the outcomes of management activities, such as prescribed fires and pest species control.</p>
<p>Aboriginal culture</p> <p>Collaborative arrangements enable Indjalandji-Dhidanu aspirations to care for their country and to be involved in the protection and presentation of its values.</p>	<p>A6. Support the Indjalandji-Dhidanu People to document, map and monitor their Dreamings and other cultural sites.</p> <p>A7. Develop an implementation plan between the State and Dugalanji Aboriginal Corporation in the exercise of native title rights and interests.</p>
<p>Shared-history</p> <p>Places of cultural heritage significance are identified and appropriately managed.</p>	<p>A8. Identify and record shared-history cultural heritage values and places of the park where possible.</p>
<p>Tourism and visitor use</p> <p>Visitor use becomes day-use only with presentation of sinkholes and cultural heritage enhanced.</p> <p>Measures taken to enhance the safety of the key visitor attribute.</p>	<p>A9. Identify alternative sites for overnight camping in the immediate Camooweal area and designate day use only at Nowranie Waterhole once alternative sites are available.</p> <p>A10. Liaise with tourism authorities, local businesses and commercial operators to promote the area's values and recreation opportunities both on and off park.</p> <p>A11. Undertake a review of the current access route to ensure the most efficient and effective route through the park to the caves and day-use area.</p> <p>A12. Complete current project to improve presentation of Big Nowranie Cave and Nowranie Waterhole.</p> <p>A13. Undertake a review of park visitor infrastructure and replace non-conforming assets/furniture to present a consistent and professional image.</p>
<p>Education and science</p> <p>Research and monitoring programs provide a greater understanding of the park's natural and cultural values and inform future management decisions.</p>	<p>A14. Liaise with research institutions and natural resource management organisations to benefit from their research and encourage research projects that will inform park management.</p> <p>A15. Encourage research that will inform park management; provide an understanding of fauna history; improve geological knowledge and catchment values of the Georgina River.</p>

Desired outcomes	Actions and guidelines
<p>Partnerships</p> <p>Collaborative management ethics and protocols are employed to facilitate a neighbourly approach to management issues on the Camooweal Caves National Park.</p>	<p>A16. Liaise with neighbours to develop and implement co-operative stock, pest plant and animal, and fire management programs.</p> <p>A17. Support the Indjalandji-Dhidhanu People's proposal of a collaborative management model for the park.</p> <p>A18. Proactively maintain a working relationship with Rocklands in the lead up to finalisation of their grazing interests.</p>
<p>Pest management</p> <p>The integrity of native plant and animal communities is maintained, and the impacts of pests are minimised through strategic, sustained management.</p>	<p>A19. Ensure that pest management focuses on maintaining and restoring essential habitat with a priority on cave and riparian environments.</p> <p>A20. Develop a pest strategy for the park once stock have been removed in 2020.</p>
<p>Fire management</p> <p>Fire management programs are developed and undertaken in a collaborative and strategic manner.</p>	<p>A21. Finalise the draft fire management strategy, implement and annually review the Fire Strategy for Camooweal Caves National Park in collaboration with the Indjalandji-Dhidhanu People and Rocklands Station.</p>
<p>Grazing</p> <p>Grazing leases are not re-issued on the park.</p>	<p>A22. Finalisation of grazing on the Park is undertaken in open and communicative manner</p>
<p>Park name</p> <p>The name of Camooweal Caves National Park has been changed to reflect its Aboriginal heritage.</p>	<p>A23. Liaise with the Dugalanji Aboriginal Corporation to fulfil a vision for re-naming the park.</p>

Tables—Conservation values management

Table 1: Regional ecosystems of biodiversity significance

Regional ecosystem number	Description	Biodiversity status
1.3.6	<i>Eucalyptus leucophylla</i> or <i>Eucalyptus pruinosa</i> woodland on terraces and minor drainage lines	Of concern
1.5.4 x 1	<i>Eucalyptus pruinosa</i> low open-woodland' and Cloncurry box (<i>Eucalyptus leucophylla</i>) low open woodland on red earths in valleys	Of concern
1.5.6	<i>Aristida</i> spp. grassland	Of concern
1.5.9	Vine tree (<i>Ventilago viminalis</i>) low open woodland on loams on sand sheet margins	Of concern
1.7.2	Silver-leaved box (<i>Eucalyptus pruinosa</i>) low open woodland on calcareous red/brown earths.	Of concern
4.3.3	<i>Eucalyptus coolabah</i> , <i>E. camaldulensis</i> +/- <i>Lysiphillum gilvum</i> open woodland on drainage lines	Of concern

Table 2: Species of conservation significance

Scientific name	Common name	Nature Conservation Act 1992 status	Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999 status	Back on Track species prioritisation framework
<i>Heteromunia pectoralis</i>	pictorella mannikin	Near threatened	-	Low
<i>Macroderma gigas</i>	ghost bat	Vulnerable	-	Critical
<i>Rhinonictes aurantia</i>	orange leaf nosed bat	Vulnerable	-	Medium
<i>Stictonetta naevosa</i>	freckled duck	Near threatened	-	Low

Table 3: Species listed in international agreements

Scientific name	Common name	BONN	CAMBA	JAMBA	ROKAMBA
<i>Ardea modesta</i>	eastern great egret	-	✓	✓	-
<i>Merops ornatus</i>	rainbow bee-eater	-	-	✓	-

BONN – Bonn Convention

CAMBA – China–Australia Migratory Bird Agreement

JAMBA – Japan–Australia Migratory Bird Agreement

ROKAMBA – Republic of Korea–Australia Migratory Bird Agreement