

KOONGARRA

FROM URANIUM PROJECT TO NATIONAL PARK



“I could be a rich man. Billions of dollars ... You can offer me anything but my land is cultural land.”

Djok Senior Traditional Owner, Jeffrey Lee

JEFFERY LEE:

- strongly opposed mining on his land
- resisted ongoing company pressure and offers of personal wealth
- has been awarded the Order of Australia in recognition of his work to protect country
- successfully fought to remove the threat of uranium mining at Koongarra
- wants to see all of Kakadu protected from mining

PHOTO: FROM THE FILM “YELLOW CAKE” WWW.YELLOWCAKE-DEFILM.DE COPYRIGHT UM WELT FILM

In 2013 – after decades of fighting - Jeffrey Lee’s vision to remove the threat of uranium mining from his country was finally realised. His land at Koongarra was incorporated into the surrounding World Heritage listed Kakadu National Park in Australia’s Northern Territory and permanently protected from mining.

The former Koongarra Project Area (KPA) lies within the traditional lands of the Djok clan and is a region of approximately 12,000 hectares. Until February 2013 Koongarra was excluded from the World Heritage listed Kakadu National Park, which completely surrounds the area. The region is unique, magnificent and important in traditional storylines that include the Rainbow Serpent and Lightning

Man. It is also home to an estimated 15,000 tonnes of high grade uranium which the French nuclear and mining giant Areva has been trying to access and develop for several decades.

Jeffrey Lee, the senior Traditional Owner of the Djok clan, speaks for Koongarra. Mr Lee has long resisted Areva’s promises of wealth and remained firm in his commitment to care for the land. In 2010 Jeffrey Lee asked the Federal Government to protect Koongarra by including it within Kakadu, stating at the time: “When you dig a hole in that country you are killing me. I don’t worry about money at all.” The Government promised to honour his wishes, and now it has.



“[Protection of Koongarra] couldn’t have happened without the commitment, the dedication, the integrity of this truly remarkable Australian, in my judgement, one of the great Australians.”

Former Australian Prime Minister Bob Hawke, February 2013

PHOTO: JUSTIN O'BRIEN

Uranium mining in the Kakadu region has always been controversial with three uranium deposits never included in the Park’s original proclamation. A significant Australian Government report in the 1970s and UNESCO’s World Heritage Committee Kakadu assessment mission in the 1990s both recommended against mining at Koongarra. The other two uranium deposits: Ranger and Jabiluka occur on the land of the Mirarr people. Rio Tinto owns the Ranger uranium mine which was imposed on the Mirarr Traditional Owners and has been operating to the north of Koongarra for 30 years. Since Ranger opened in 1981 the mine has been plagued with water management and contamination issues. A detailed investigation of the impacts of uranium mining by the Australian Senate found clear evidence of “a pattern of under performance and non-compliance” and concluded that significant changes were needed to avoid “serious or irreversible damage”¹

In the late 1990s in the face of enormous pressure from Government and the mining company, the Mirarr lead an

1. Commonwealth of Australia, 2003, Regulating the Ranger, Jabiluka, Beverley and Honeymoon uranium mines, p9.

extraordinary campaign which saw mining halted at Jabiluka. Senior Traditional Owner Yvonne Margarula has recently restated her desire to see Jabiluka included within Kakadu and permanently protected from uranium mining.

When Koongarra’s protection was announced, Jeffrey Lee acknowledged the inspiration he has drawn from the Mirarr’s struggle: “I also want to thank the Mirarr people and especially the senior traditional owner, Yvonne Margarula, and the Gundjeihmi Aboriginal Corporation. They have stood by me and showed me that Aboriginal people can say no.”

Protection of Koongarra is a long overdue recognition of Jeffrey Lee’s vision and tenacity and a powerful and lasting victory for both Aboriginal and environmental rights.

One of the three missing pieces of Kakadu has been restored but the heart of Kakadu still has two uranium related holes at Ranger and Jabiluka. The threat and struggle continues.

As Jeffrey Lee says:

“I hope that one day Kakadu National Park will be truly complete with the Mirarr lands at Ranger and Jabiluka included in the National Park.”



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PHOTO: GARETH LEWIS, ABORIGINAL AREAS PROTECTION AUTHORITY