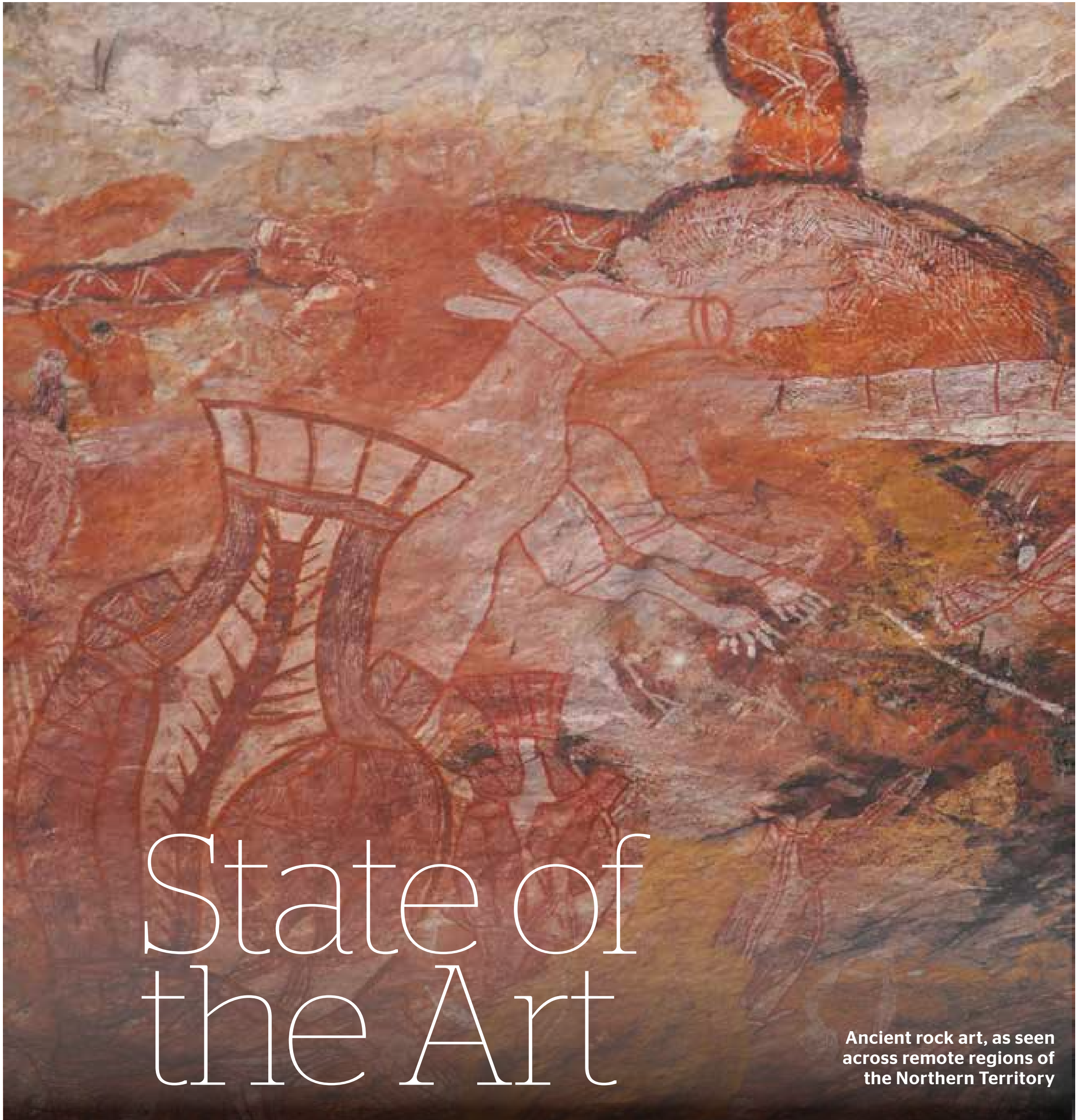
The Northern Territory



State of the Art

Ancient rock art, as seen across remote regions of the Northern Territory

The Northern Territory is home to the richest Aboriginal culture in Australia, with more than half the territory owned by indigenous communities. **Chris Fitch** heads to the territory's 'Top End' to see how traditional practices and lifestyles are being adapted for the 21st century

SPOTLIGHT ON...
THE NORTHERN TERRITORY

- **Geographic location:** Tropics
- **Latitude/Longitude:** 11°21'55.3"S, 132°17'50.9"E
- **Land area:** 522,459 sq miles (1,353,162 km²)
- **Population:** 244,307 (2015)
- **Religion:** 47.7 per cent Christianity, 45.7 per cent secular or no affiliated religion
- **Born overseas:** 19.8 per cent (2016)
- **Unemployment:** 5.3 per cent (2011)
- **Proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples:** 25.5 per cent (2016)

'Take photo, welcome,' encourages Roland Burrunali, Aboriginal rock art tour guide, waving his arm emphatically towards a vast array of breath-taking paintings on the sandstone walls encircling us. The large monolith on which we stand, rising up high out of the dry and dusty red earth landscape that surrounds us, is thickly layered in rich artworks, some clearly displayed on smooth surfaces, others hidden away in cracks in the rocks. Ancient galleries filled with colourful entanglements of kangaroos, crocodiles, fish, birds and snakes, painted in iconic reds, yellows, blacks and whites, utterly consume this space, the surfaces of the rocks decorated in layer upon layer of vivid art.

This is Injalak Hill, a distinctive rocky outcrop standing tall above north Australia's Arnhem Land, a vast and sparsely populated region of the northerly 'Top End' part of the Northern Territory, roughly 300km from the regional capital of Darwin. Tens of thousands of similarly impressive rock artworks can be found across the Arnhem Plateau, running across this nearly 100,000 sq km escarpment. For millennia, these drawings would have been vital to Aboriginal practices of passing on stories about the sacred land to the younger generations, alongside oral storytelling and ceremonial song and dance.

Aboriginal tour guide, Roland Burrunali, describing rock art on Injalak Hill

▶ NATURE

Hundreds of bird species call the Cobourg Peninsula home

Saltwater crocodiles dominate coasts along the Northern Territory

Kakadu National Park and Arnhem Land are both home to an immense variety of wildlife, including many species long since lost to most populated parts of the country (or even the relatively near city of Darwin). However, there can be little doubt that the natural environment in this part of the world is dominated by the mighty estuarine (saltwater) crocodile, whose turf covers entire coastal areas and almost every single water body for hundreds of miles inland (despite their name, saltwater crocodiles are very happy living in freshwater).

Their population had dwindled to as few as 3,000 in the early 1970s, which led to their protected status in 1971, and eventually a listing on the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora. From an IUCN Red List rating of 'endangered' through the 1980s and 'vulnerable' in the 1990s, they have now recovered to be considered of 'least concern', with 120,000 wild individuals across the Northern Territory (and hundreds of thousands more in captivity, supplying leather to the fashion industry).

As well as crocodiles, the undisturbed, essentially pristine waters of the Garig Gunak Barlu marine park – which surrounds the Cobourg Peninsula to the far north of Arnhem Land, and is joint managed by Aboriginal communities and the government – are populated with sharks, rays, dolphins, dugong, and all manner of colourful fish. Cobourg is the site of the very first RAMSAR wetland, designated as such in May 1974, providing a home for numerous endangered species, including loggerhead, green, hawksbill and leatherback turtles. Hundreds of bird species, such as black and whistling kites, the most common birds of prey in this region, fill the trees with their vivid plumages.

These are just some of the 280 bird species which can be found in the Top End, around a third of Australia's entire amount. They are joined in the trees by sugar gliders and other types of possums, while ground-dwelling mammals such as dingoes, northern brown bandicoots, brush-tailed rabbit-rats, and quolls prowl the ground below, along with reptiles such as goannas and numerous venomous snakes. And, although iconic red kangaroos don't tend to make it to the far north of the Northern Territory, their macropod cousin the agile wallaby can be found in abundance.

'The artist use own blood for paint,' explains Burrunali, a member of the local Bininj community. 'They put a string here, really tight, make really pump,' he demonstrates, thrusting out his forearm, 'and they get kangaroo bone, making really sharp like needle, and put it like this... bang!'

The collected blood would then be carefully mixed in a small grinding hole in the rock floor which once served as an artistic palette. Iron-rich red ochre clay (*kunrodjbe*) helped create the authentic red 'paint' which Burrunali's ancestors would have used, while yellow ochre (*karlba*) would be required for yellow paint, charcoal (*kunnjirrke*) for black, and white clay (*delek*) for white. Paintbrushes made from reeds (and baby hairs for the very fine details) would then be utilised for the important act of painting on the rocks.

The content of all this artwork is as varied as it is eye-catching. As well as depictions of the diverse and iconic wildlife seen across the Northern Territory, the artworks on Injalak Hill include 'mimi spirits', supposedly the original inhabitants of this land, who taught the first Aborigines how to paint, how to hunt, and how to survive.

They are joined by visualisations of Yingana, the Creation Mother. Her story describes how she once carried 'spirit children' around the country in woven dilly bags – each with a different language – and dropped them off en route, leaving plentiful supplies of 'bush tucker' along the way. Finally, numerous hand prints can be seen across all the artworks, where the artist has placed their hand on the rock and blown paint onto it, so it leaves behind a unique signature.

Burrunali points to various works on the underside of protruding rock faces as he leads the way through narrow gaps between the sandstone boulders. 'This is 20,000 years ago,' he emphasises. While the artworks are certainly extremely old, their specific age is considered relatively unimportant to the Bininj. The fact that they tell traditional Dreamtime stories of creation is what makes them sacred.

Nevertheless, recent scientific research, utilising thermoluminescence dating techniques, has enabled multidisciplinary researchers to generate accurate figures for the age of some pieces. Recently, artworks at Madjedbebe rock shelter in neighbouring Kakadu National Park were dated to at least 65,000-years-old, many thousands of years older than previously believed. Such paintings would likely cover more than 2,000 generations, each one patiently adding their paintings atop existing stories. It's evidence that this could well be the home of the longest continuous human culture found anywhere in the world.

Yet, the revolutionary arrival of Europeans – the so-called 'whitefella' – changed the practice of painting rock art immensely. As decreed by the elders, Burrunali and fellow descendants of the artists whose paintings can be seen on Injalak Hill no longer paint upon the rock (or use blood in their paint). It's in recognition of the upturned, modern lifestyle which they now live. 'They recognise that the people who painted that art lived a very different life from what they're living now,' explains David McMahon, senior guide for local tour operator Venture North, 'and they'd prefer to preserve those stories as they

are.' Today, bark and paper have become the primary surfaces for painting, enabling Injalak Hill and other gallery sites to gradually turn from dynamic artistic hubs, into static memorialisations to past generations.

CULTURAL PROMOTION

Within sight of Injalak Hill, just a few miles away, lies the remote community of Gunbalanya, a settlement of around 1,200 mainly Kunwinjku-speaking Bininj residents. The community sits in a clearing of distinctive red earth, surrounded by lush greenery, with a crocodile-infested billabong nearby for good measure. During the wet season, Gunbalanya becomes completely cut off, existing essentially as an island when swollen rivers and inundated floodplains drown the surrounding landscape.

Central to this community is the Injalak Arts and Crafts centre, a locally-owned non-profit that opened in 1989. It's a visual demonstration of the contemporary relationship between Aboriginal communities and modern, developed, urbanised Australia. Walking into the centre, colourful rivers of paints can be seen running across the courtyard, staining the earth into a vibrant rainbow delta. A collection of artists sit hard at work outside, foreheads furrowed in concentration, hands delicately drawing lines and symbolic motifs upon the assortment of objects which serve as their canvasses. One man adds dark outlines of various creatures to a red-stained wooden mimi spirit carving, another adds white rings to a black-and-red didgeridoo.

The centre allows Bininj artists to tell their stories in a creative environment, producing a wide-range of paintings, carvings, fibre weavings, and screen-printed fabrics, which are then sold to visiting tourists or online around the world. Visitors, in turn, are able to see the artists at work, ask questions, and know that they are purchasing genuine artefacts from which the money will go directly to helping the residents of Gunbalanya (80 per cent of each sale goes straight to the artist, the rest is reinvested in art supplies for the centre, as well as supporting various education and cultural projects across West Arnhem Land). They also help promote Aboriginal art and culture overseas; Burrunali himself made a first international trip in the summer of 2016 to represent Injalak Arts at the Festival del Caribe in Cuba.

It's impossible not to pause and reflect on what a radical change this is from how Bininj ancestors previously practised their art. In just a few short centuries, a cultural practice such as rock painting, which existed for tens of thousands of years, suddenly came to an end. It's just one example of the psychological 'trauma', as McMahon describes it, still afflicting many Aboriginal communities, whose entire lifestyles were devastated when Europeans first appeared on Australia's shores. 'Imagine being those old people,' ponders McMahon, 'and being so aware that the way of life you protected for thousands of generations is going to be gone – and there is nothing you can do about it. The feeling of complete hopelessness. It would be pretty horrible.'

Australia in the 1970s saw the unfolding of the revolutionary land rights movement, when land was

▶ CLIMATE

Local ecosystems are threatened by rising seas and invasive species

The annual wet season brings hot, humid, and highly unsettled weather

■ There are said to be two types of weather in the Top End: hot and hotter. More specifically, there is the 'hot' dry season, which runs from around April to September, and the 'hotter' wet season, from October to March. While close proximity to the equator means the actual temperature doesn't vary significantly through the year – generally fluctuating between the low and high 30s – intense humidity through the wet season can make it feel far hotter than it really is. This season also sees the coastline bombarded by a series of ferocious cyclones, typically two or three per year. Most of Darwin, in particular, still carries the heavy memory of the unexpectedly destructive Cyclone Tracy, which devastated the city in December 1974.

Recent years have seen an assortment of impacts caused by climate change, from a shift in burning seasons, to the increased spread of invasive species. Federal government figures state that northern Australia has seen sea level rise of up to 7.1 millimetres per year since the early 1990s, threatening the Northern Territory's coastal ecosystems and urban developments. In Kakadu, saltwater incursions into freshwater ecosystems has seen the tidal range of creeks moving four kilometres inland, and the sea level is expected to rise by between 8 and 30 centimetres by 2030. In Darwin, the number of days exceeding 35°C is expected to grow significantly, from 11 per year at present to up to 69 by 2030, and 308 by 2070. The city is also particularly vulnerable to storm surges, river flooding, and more intense cyclones, with an estimated 60 per cent increase in storm intensity by 2030, and a 140 per cent increase by 2070.

officially returned to its traditional owners. As the least developed region of the country, the Northern Territory was in a better position than most to follow through on this, to the extent that over half of the territory is now owned by Aboriginal communities. Nevertheless, there remain significant ongoing issues between communities, epitomised by the ongoing failed attempts to reach an official treaty with the indigenous people, which Australia – unlike Canada, New Zealand, and other colonised nations – never formally signed. Even the language of the land rights movement reveals a vast misunderstanding of how indigenous culture operates; Aboriginal people belong to their land, not the other way around.

SHARED STORIES

Next door to Arnhem Land is the UNESCO World Heritage Site of Kakadu National Park, a landscape also rich in rock art, with more than 5,000 sites spread over 20,000 sq km. Just next to the East Alligator river, dividing the two landscapes, is Ubirr – another large sandstone monolith. Like Injalak Hill, Ubirr is coated in rock art, cementing its status as a hugely significant location for traditional inhabitants in this part of the Northern Territory for generations.

Ubirr also depicts the winds of change. Depictions of the extinct thylacine, also known as the Tasmanian tiger, help date some of the art here as being prior to the disappearance of the species from the Australian mainland around 4,000 years ago, following the arrival of the dingo from Southeast Asia.

Furthermore, numerous pieces of contact art reveal Aboriginal responses to the pivotal arrival of 'whitefellas'. At one gallery, McMahon directs my attention to one yellow ochre drawing of a European, to the right of a particularly decorative drawing of a long-necked turtle. 'A big, long, tall figure,' he describes, 'he's wearing pants, he's smoking a pipe, he's got his sleeves rolled up a little bit, and

GEOPOLITICS

Darwin's Parliament House is affectionately known as 'the wedding cake'

The clue is in the name; the Northern Territory is not a state, but is one of Australia's ten territories. Territories have limited ability to self-govern, but send only two senators to the Federal government, as opposed to the 12 sent by states. The 1998 referendum was the latest attempt to see the vast region converted to official statedom, but was rejected, with a 51.3 per cent majority in favour of a 'no' vote.

Twenty years later, the imminent conversion of the territory into an official state is again being seriously explored, including such fringe discussions as whether the Australian flag should have an extra star added if the Northern Territory ever became a state. However, there are concerns over whether it even has a large enough population (with less than a quarter of a million people inhabiting an area of land over five times larger than the entire United Kingdom) to effectively function as a full state. The status quo instead sees inflowing federal funding which keeps local public services afloat.

Politics in the Northern Territory generally revolve around the Country Liberal Party versus the Australian Labor Party, which bears minimal resemblance to nationwide politics down south in the Australian Capital Territory. Nevertheless, the territory's geographical location makes the Top End strategically important to Australia's interests overseas, with much of the Australian military based in and around Darwin, where it has easy access to Southeast Asia. For that same reason, there has even been debate regarding the possibility of a US base opening in the territory, although unlikely to occur in the near future.

TIMELINE

65,000BC
Estimated arrival of early Indigenous inhabitants to Australia.

1606
The Dutch ship *Duyfken*, captained by Willem Janszoon, first sights the continent of Australia. Seventeen years later, his compatriot Willem van Colster becomes the first European to visit the continent's shores, naming the land after his ship, the *Arnhem*.

1869
Nearly a century after Captain Cook had visited and claimed the east coast of Australia for the British Empire, the settlement of Port Darwin is established by the British on the northern coast, in recognition of the word famous naturalist. The surrounding settlement, Palmerston, was renamed Darwin in 1911.

1942
Japanese bombers flew 64 raids over Darwin during the Second World War. Undoubtedly the largest attack came on 19 February, when 188 planes attacked ships and buildings. Nearly 1,000 Australians were killed over the course of the bombings.

1967
Historic referendum sees a landslide 91 per cent support given to removing sections of the Australian Constitution which specifically discriminated against Aboriginal people.

1974
Cyclone Tracy, not widely perceived to be a significant threat, smashes into Darwin on Christmas Eve, destroying most of the city, and killing 65 people.

1978
The Government of the Northern Territory is formed, granting administrative powers over the entire region.

1998
A referendum proposing that the Northern Territory becomes Australia's seventh state is narrowly defeated.

PHYSICAL GEOGRAPHY

The main physical features are predominantly split between Uluru and Kata Tjuta in the south of the territory, and the surrounding landscape of the Top End in the north. In Kakadu, the largest of the territory's national parks, the landscape undulates with striking volcanic ridges in the south of the park, full of dramatic waterfalls such as the enormous Twin and Jim Jim Falls, 150m and 200m tall respectively. Further north reveals a diverse terrain of vast, dry escarpments, flat, scrubby savannah, and unpredictable floodplains, that fill with water during the months of the wet season.

To the west, the territory is drained by the 510km-long Victoria River, the longest continuous waterway in the Northern Territory (the 400km-long Roper River does the same to the east, draining southeast Arnhem Land as part of its 80,000km² catchment area) while the journey from Darwin to the Cobourg Peninsula involves crossing the crocodile-inhabited Adelaide, Mary, South Alligator and East Alligator rivers. At the territory's coast, which stretches in total for 5,437km, mangrove swamps give way to dramatic empty beaches and huge tidal flats.

In the far north of West Arnhem Land is the Cobourg Peninsula, a protected, almost uninhabited collection of coves and bays, with long, rangy headlands that strike out into the Arafura Sea like fingers. Offshore, the most prominent landmarks are the Tiwi Islands, the most prominent of the Northern Territory's 887 islands. At 5,786 sq km, the uninhabited Melville island, the largest of the Tiwi islands, is the largest in Australia (excluding Tasmania).

From coasts to deserts, the territory hosts dramatic physical features

CULTURE

■ **FILM**: **The Tracker**
Exploring ingrained Australian issues with racism in the early 20th century, this film sees an indigenous man – 'The Tracker' – being hired by three white colonialists to track down a man accused of murder. The four head into the wilderness, where conflict awaits, as the Tracker has to wrestle with his allegiance to ancient heritage, and his loyalty to the modern world which employs his services.

■ **BOOK: The Songlines**
Bruce Chatwin's novel informed the outside world of the powerful 'songlines' which criss-cross the Australian landscape between indigenous communities. Thirty years later, there remain few better tomes when trying to understand the deep and rich connections between Aboriginal people, the land upon which they live, and the traditional melodies and ceremonies which can be used to tell stories between people who have never met.

■ **BOOK**: **Why Warriors Lie Down and Die**
Indigenous Australians face some of the most severe poverty and health crises in Australia, and this book explores some of the cultural misunderstandings that have enabled these social problems to persist. Richard Trudgen shares lessons from years living with the Yolngu people, aiming to educate the rest of the country about the immense psychological conflict they experience.

■ **SONG: From Little Things Big Things Grow**
It may have been written 15 years after the event, but Paul Kelly & The Messengers' six-minute folksy tribute to the struggle for land rights and reconciliation among indigenous Australians in the 1970s, which eventually led to the passing of the Aboriginal Land Rights Act in 1976, when the NT made the first attempt to legally recognise the ownership of the traditional inhabitants, has become a popular anthem synonymous with the campaign.

■ **BAND: Yothu Yindi**
Founded in 1986, Yothu Yindi (pictured, left, at the Sydney Olympics) was started by Yunupingu, from the Yolngu people of Eastern Arnhem Land. As a hybrid of indigenous and non-indigenous musicians, Yothu Yindi gave a high profile platform to Aboriginal music and culture. Accordingly, the band used everything from modern drums and guitars, to didgeridoos and clapsticks. Upon Yunupingu's death in 2013, then-prime minister Julia Gillard described him as 'a great Australian voice in the efforts towards reconciliation'.

his hands are firmly in his pockets. Bininj always painted whitefellas with their hands in their pockets. That became their view of them.' Other examples of contact art include illustrations of large wagons and ships, and even figures wielding distinctively rifle-shaped weapons. While indigenous Australians would have heard about Europeans – and to an extent have been expecting their arrival – these paintings give an idea of the kind of aggressive greeting they received.

The campaign to ensure Ubirr remained the sacred site it is today was led by the late 'Big' Bill Neidjie, a Bunidj man McMahon describes as 'the Australian Dalai Lama'. Born in the 1920s, he was one of the last people to grow up in a traditional Aboriginal lifestyle. Having recognised which way the metaphorical winds were blowing, he devoted himself to bridging the gap in communication between the Aboriginal and European communities, who so struggled to understand each other. Near the Nadab Lookout at the top of Ubirr, a plaque commemorates his life with an inscription of his words: 'My people... Not many... We getting too old. Young people. I don't know if they can hang on to this story. But now, you know this story... you responsible now. You got to go with you. To earth. Might be you can hang on, hang onto this story. To this earth.'

'He very much knew that they were coming into another period of change, and he recognised that things were never going to be the same,' explains McMahon. 'His idea was maybe the next generation can't hang onto the same story, but if the stories are shared, and if this place is enjoyed by visitors around the world, then the stories will be here forever.'

Aboriginal culture has been forced to rapidly evolve over the past century or so in order to find a place in the modern world, and the changing role of traditional rock art is a significant symbolic indicator of that evolution. Nowadays, the close partnerships between local communities like Gunbalanya, the artists whose work is gaining global recognition through the Injalak Art centre, and tours bringing international visitors to learn about this other identity of Australia, all build on the tireless work of campaigners such as Bill Neidjie to at least ensure some form of cultural protection for these sacred sites and their artworks into the 21st century. ●

LINKS

■ **Venture North:** venturenorth.com.au
■ **Tourism NT:** northernterritory.com