



How can PHA help stop uranium mining in Kakadu?

David Thomas
NT Branch President

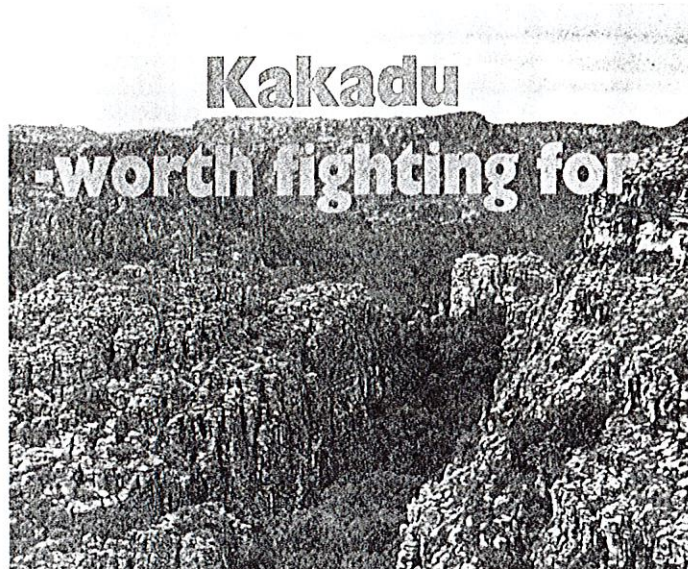
At the 1996 Annual PHA conference held in Perth, a policy opposing uranium mining was adopted by the association. The NT branch of PHA, with the support of the national secretariat in Canberra, has been lobbying politicians for the last 5 years trying to stop uranium mining in Kakadu National Park. We have been part of successful efforts to oppose repeated attempts at ALP national conferences to weaken their 'three mines' policy. For the last two years our attention has been focussed on the Howard Federal Government and its support for the proposed uranium mine at Jabiluka in Kakadu National Park.

The owners of the country that is now part of the Jabiluka mining lease are the Mirrar people. They have been under enormous pressure from the mining company, ERA, and the Commonwealth and NT Governments to allow a uranium mine on their country. They have bravely and steadfastly refused to agree to such a mine and have been involved in a difficult legal and political battle to save their land.

Various promises have been made to the Mirrar about minimising harm and social impact from the mine. The 1997 Kakadu Region Social Impact Study stated that the 'safeguards and offsets' promised by the Commonwealth in 1977 when it overrode Aboriginal opposition and first allowed uranium mining in the region have 'not lived up to the expectations of the people of the time'.¹ This document has been treated with understandable disdain by the Mirrar because of the significant role of the mining company, ERA, in the study and because it specifically excluded the 'the question of the Jabiluka mine'. However the documentation of the failure to deliver the promised benefits to Aboriginal people of uranium mining in the last 20 years helps to explain the Mirrar's distrust of today's 'empty promises'.

The Mirrar have been joined in their struggle by local, national and international environment and social justice organisations. In March a blockade camp was established near the mining lease to help prevent any commencement of mining at Jabiluka. Hundreds of supporters have stayed at the camp and participated in non-violent protest at the gates to the mining lease. Unfortunately, some have already been arrested - the senior traditional owner, Yvonne Margarula was even arrested on her own country for trespass! Many other people have interrupted their holidays to Kakadu to visit the camp and show their support.

I, like other visitors to Jabiluka, was astounded by its natural beauty: it definitely shares the World Heritage ecological values of Kakadu National Park which surrounds the mining lease. The grandeur of the Jabiluka escarpment was recently the spectacular backdrop for a free dawn concert by rock bands Regurgitator, Midnight Oil and Coloured Stone. I needed to walk only 100 metres from the entrance gates of the mining lease to reach the edge of the enormous Djarr Djarr wetlands with its beautiful waterlilies,



paperbarks and abundant bird, animal and fish life (and no doubt crocodiles, so I was a little wary).

However this is not just about the natural beauty immediately obvious to my non-Aboriginal eyes. This is also about Aboriginal self-determination. It is about Aboriginal health. These principles and concerns are central to PHA and the public health community in 1998. Aboriginal people have repeatedly stated the importance of their land to their well-being and to their health. How then can we let the nation allow the theft and desecration of the Mirrar's land at a time when all agree to the need to address Aboriginal health problems and living conditions? Is it fair that the adverse public health effects of uranium mining and the testing of nuclear weapons in Australia has been borne disproportionately by Aboriginal people?

In the next few months, the legal challenges by the Mirrar will be heard by the courts. The blockade camp will continue. There will also be a federal election: the ALP resolved at this year's national conference to allow 'no new Uranium mines' if elected (which would include Jabiluka if work has not yet commenced). Beyond this year we should be concerned of plans for more uranium mines: Koongarra is also within Kakadu and is adjacent to the popular tourist site and rock art galleries of Noorlangie Rock; and more uranium mines are planned for other Aboriginal people's land.

PHA has written to politicians and responded to the various Environmental Impact Studies for proposed uranium mines. You can too. You can use PHA's uranium mining policy to tell others of the Association's opposition to uranium mining. You can also attend the public demonstrations and fund-raising events throughout the country. You can also send money to support the Jabiluka campaign (the PHA NT branch recently donated \$500) to The Environment Centre NT, GPO Box 2120, Darwin NT 0801. Your donation will be tax-deductible.

Reference

1. *Kakadu Region Social Impact Study: Community Action Plan*. Report of the Study Advisory Group, July 1997. Supervising Scientist, Canberra.