

MEDIA RELEASE

Tom Harley

Chairman, Australian Heritage Council

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AUSTRALIAN HERITAGE COUNCIL SEEKS COMMENTS ON WEST KIMBERLEY NATIONAL HERITAGE ASSESSMENT

The Australian Heritage Council (the Council), the Australian Government's independent heritage advisory body, is seeking comments on its preliminary National Heritage assessment of the west Kimberley from owners, occupiers and Indigenous people with rights or interests in the area.

The Chairman of the Council, Tom Harley, said the Council's preliminary assessment of the west Kimberley has now been completed and an area of almost 20 million hectares has been identified as potentially having the high threshold values that would qualify it for listing on the National Heritage List (NHL).

"The National Heritage List recognises, celebrates and protects our most important natural, Indigenous and historic heritage places," Mr Harley said.

"The west Kimberley, with its outstanding wildlife, glorious coastal stretches, spectacular gorges and waterfalls, ancient and ongoing Indigenous cultural traditions, and pastoral and pearling heritage, is one of the most extraordinary places in Australia.

"The Council's assessment of the National Heritage values of the west Kimberley region is being undertaken at the request of the Federal Minister for Environment Protection, Heritage and the Arts, Peter Garrett, in accordance with a February 2008 agreement between the Commonwealth and Western Australian Governments.

"The preliminary assessment has identified a large area which might have the high values that would qualify it for the NHL. The process now is to consult with owners, occupiers and Indigenous people with rights or interests in the area, to determine what areas the AHC will recommend for the NHL. National Heritage listing would provide recognition and protection of any outstanding heritage values in the west Kimberley. The Council's assessment is also useful in identifying those areas which do not meet the high threshold required for National Heritage listing.

"It is important to remember that should the area, or any part of it, be included in the National Heritage List, this would not affect current lawful use. For example, existing grazing would not be affected nor would previously approved mining and exploration activities that are currently permitted, or recreation activities like fishing, camping or hiking, and any activities currently permitted under Native Title."

Under the *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999* (EPBC Act), the area identified in the preliminary assessment is now the basis for consultation with owners, occupiers and Indigenous people with a right or interest.

"Consultation is an essential part of the Council's process and I encourage all owners, occupiers and Indigenous people within the area the Council has identified as potentially having National Heritage values to take advantage of this opportunity to submit their views," Mr Harley said.

The Council has written to all owners and occupiers within the area identified as potentially having National Heritage values, including details about how to submit comments. In making its final recommendation to the Minister on the assessment, the Council will take into account all comments it receives regarding the values.

Before the Minister makes his final decision on whether to add any areas of the west Kimberley to the National Heritage List he will take into account the Council's recommendations and all comments received during the consultation, including those related to possible social and economic factors.

Information about the assessment is available on the Australian Heritage Council's website, www.ahc.gov.au.