

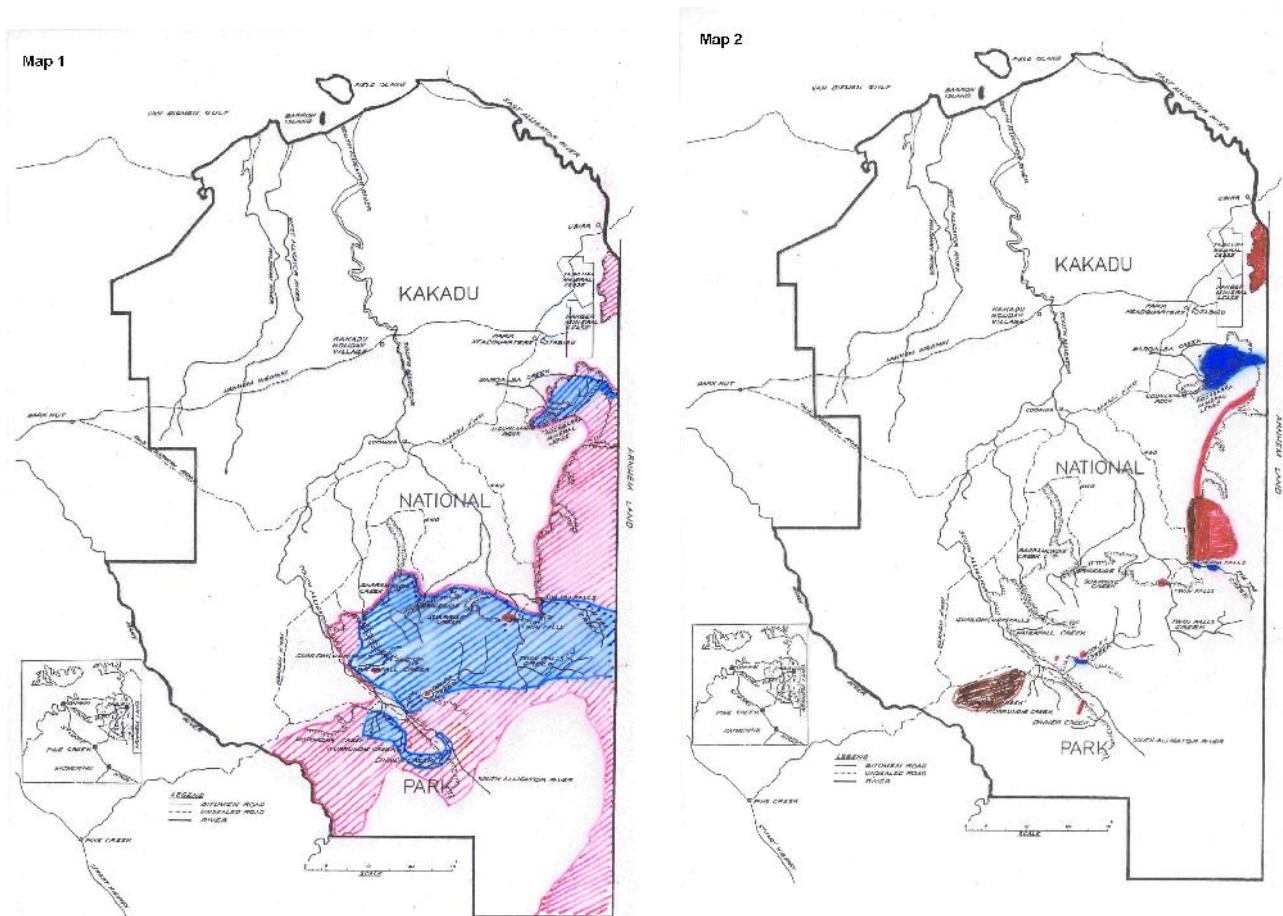
A Brief History of Bushwalking in Kakadu and Some Proposals for the Future by Russell Willis

This is a somewhat updated version of a discussion paper I prepared in late 2006.

Prior to 1974, there was no organised bushwalking group in Darwin. The Darwin Bushwalking Club was founded in June that year. I attended the first meeting as did Alan Moy who is still active in the club. We began exploring parts of what eventually became Kakadu almost immediately. In those days, there was almost no restriction on where bushwalkers could go.

The first stage of Kakadu was declared in 1979. Few new restrictions were placed on bushwalkers in the early 1980s but, as the Aboriginal traditional owners of the park became more concerned about bushwalking (or, perhaps more open in expressing their concern), some areas were closed and a system of approved routes was instituted. The two maps below and the first map on the following page are from a seminar I gave at a public meeting in 1992. The coloured areas on Map 1 show the areas of most potential bushwalking interest in Kakadu. These are the areas where we can find good water without large crocodiles – the escarpment country and some similar areas in the southern highlands.

In the ten years from 1974 to 1984, the Darwin Bushwalking Club had walked in most of those areas; so had I. I ran my first commercial trip in 1984 and set up Willis's Walkabouts full time in 1986. By 1992, the program was very similar to what it is today. In Map 1, the areas to which Willis's Walkabouts had reasonable access in 1992 are shown in blue. The approved walking routes were all inside that area. Map 2 at right shows areas where bushwalking had been restricted by that time.



The small red area at the northeast corner of the map is the Northern Outliers. In the early 1980s, this was one of the most popular areas for weekend and long weekend walks for the Darwin Bushwalking Club. Willis's Walkabouts ran a number of trips which visited the area in the late 1980s and very early 1990s but it has been almost totally closed to the public since 1991 or 1992.

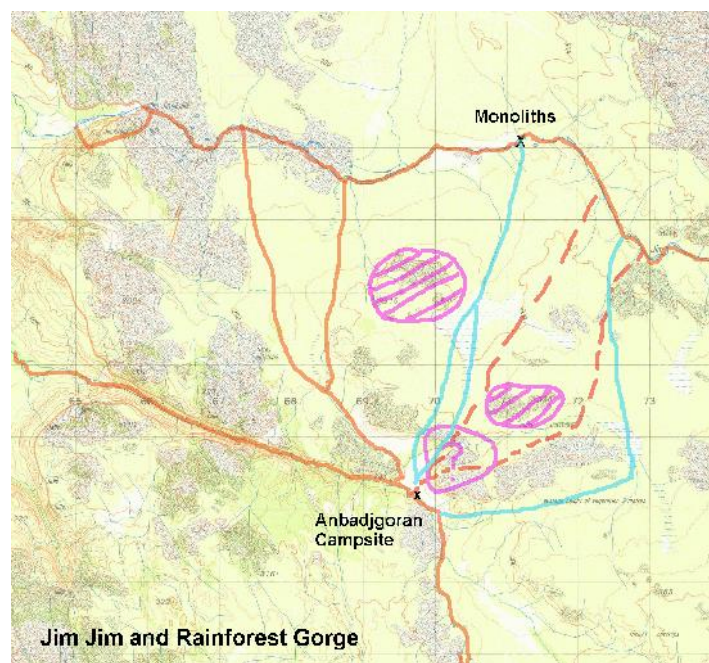
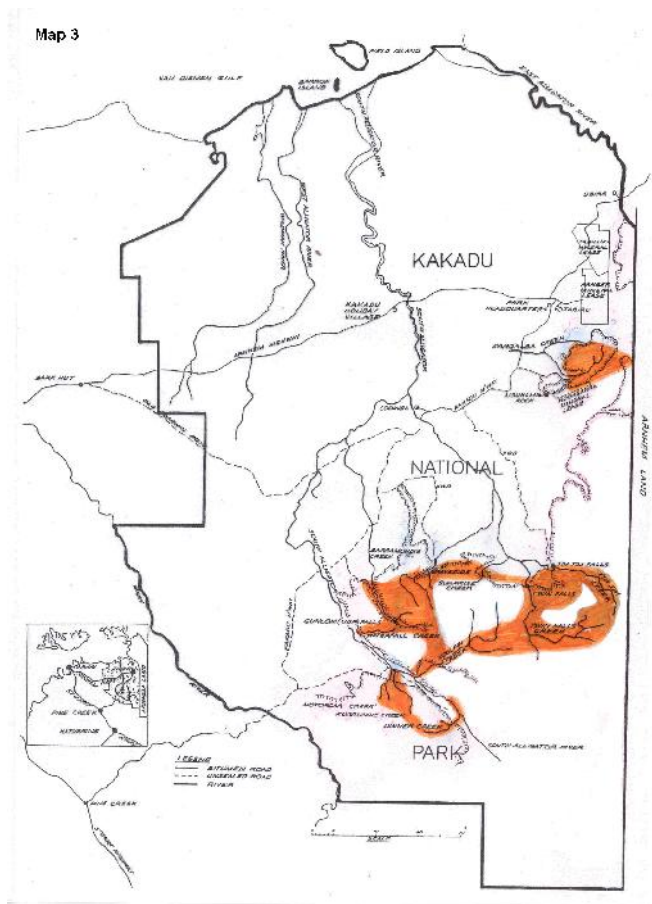
The other red area shows places Willis's Walkabouts had run trips where bushwalking access had been completely restricted. The biggest loss was an area just north of Jim Jim Creek above the falls and a route which connected the southern and northern walks. My very first commercial walk in March 1984 (Alan Moy, myself and one paying customer) began near Koolpin and finished at Jabiru, passing through the corridor shown in red. It was a great walk. I was sad to see it go. Blue shows areas where there were (and are) restrictions on numbers or campsites. Brown shows two areas where final approval or disapproval hadn't been decided. *Neither was ever approved.*

Map 3, shown at right, shows the areas where bushwalking is currently permitted in orange. Even here bushwalkers are restricted to approved route corridors which means that at least half of this area is technically out of bounds. (The 1996 Bushwalking Strategy document mentioned below refers to the approved routes as corridors, perhaps 1 km wide. It states that "following a creek normally includes rocks and hills on either side of valley" unless otherwise stated as at Koolpin where one side of the creek is out of bounds.)

There is one exception to these restrictions. We have been able to run a few trips outside of the approved routes where we have been accompanied by Aboriginal guides.

There are good reasons for some of the restrictions, but I believe that the restrictions have gone further than they need to. Two examples.

Stag Creek (near Koolpin). Originally no restriction, then restricted to miss a side creek and burial site which had been vandalised. That was reasonable, but access to the area was then eliminated altogether along with the eastern approach ("Little Freezing") to Freezing Gorge.



Jim Jim and Rainforest (Anbadjgoran).

Our Jim Jim and Rainforest route visits the monoliths and the camp site which is labeled at the top of Anbadjgoran. The solid red-orange lines show currently approved routes. The two dashed lines show routes which used to be approved. This allowed us to do a loop walk to and beyond the monoliths, then down to the Anbadjgoran campsite, then down the gorge.

One or both of the pink cross hatched areas are areas which need to be avoided. The third with the question mark is an area that might also have a site of significance which needs to be avoided. Because of this, the route was first shifted west, then closed altogether. Now we have to do the walk as a "Y" up to the monoliths, then back down Jim Jim Creek, then across to the Anbadjgoran campsite.

This forces us to camp closer to Jim Jim Falls than we would and means that some groups can't get to the monoliths at all. To make matters worse, I didn't find out about the final change for five months after that change had taken place.

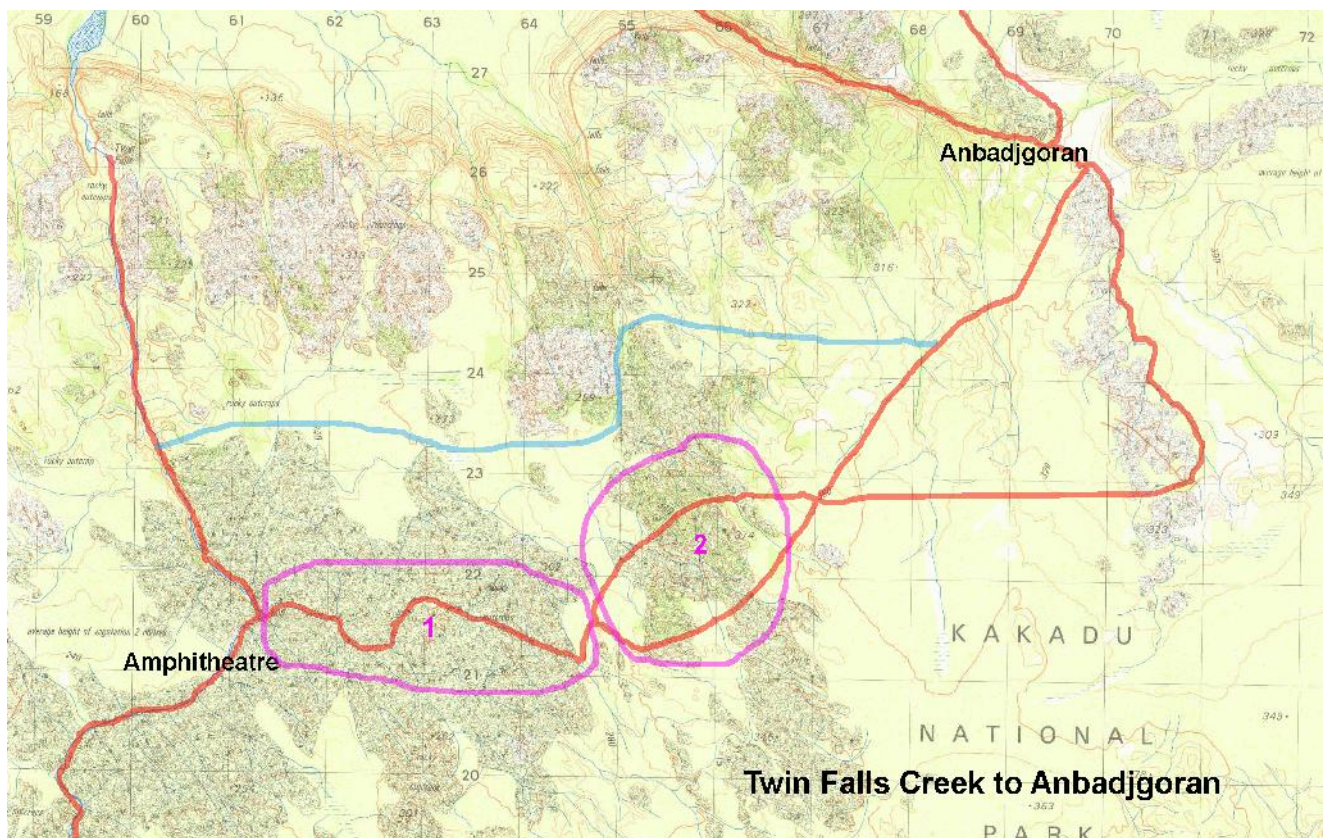
As a commercial tour operator, we have a lot to lose by not following the approved route. Private parties who might be doing a one-off walk don't have the same incentive to stick to the route. The attractions of both the monoliths and the camp site at the top of Anbadjgoran are now known to many southern bushwalkers. They would be more likely to follow a sensible loop route that avoids the sensitive areas than they are to do the currently approved "Y" shape.

I can't see why it was not possible to come up with an alternative which allowed the loop while missing the site of significance. If it were possible to use one of the routes shown in blue, we could avoid the areas which need to be avoided while doing a loop which is easier and more enjoyable than the existing approved route.

1996 Bushwalking Strategy

Concerns about bushwalking led the park management to commission the preparation of a bushwalking strategy document in 1996. A lot of effort went into producing this. Very little ever came of it. The difficulties were summed up in the introduction. "The implementation of conventional bushwalking management models was considered inadequate to protect Aboriginal interests and culturally appropriate bushwalking management was viewed as a difficult, costly and time consuming exercise."

Another quote shows how the approved routes were developed. "The map of approved routes was compiled several years ago using walks already approved for Willis's Walkabouts. It does not necessarily include routes already approved for other walkers or other possible bushwalking routes." The approved routes are an historic artefact. **Better routes exist.** As far as I can tell, the only reason some of these are not on the approved list is that I didn't choose to use them in some of my early trips. As an example, the approved short route from Twin to Jim Jim Falls is much harder than it needs to be. The map below shows the approved routes and one possible, much easier alternative. The red-orange lines show the currently approved routes. The two pink ovals show very rough country.

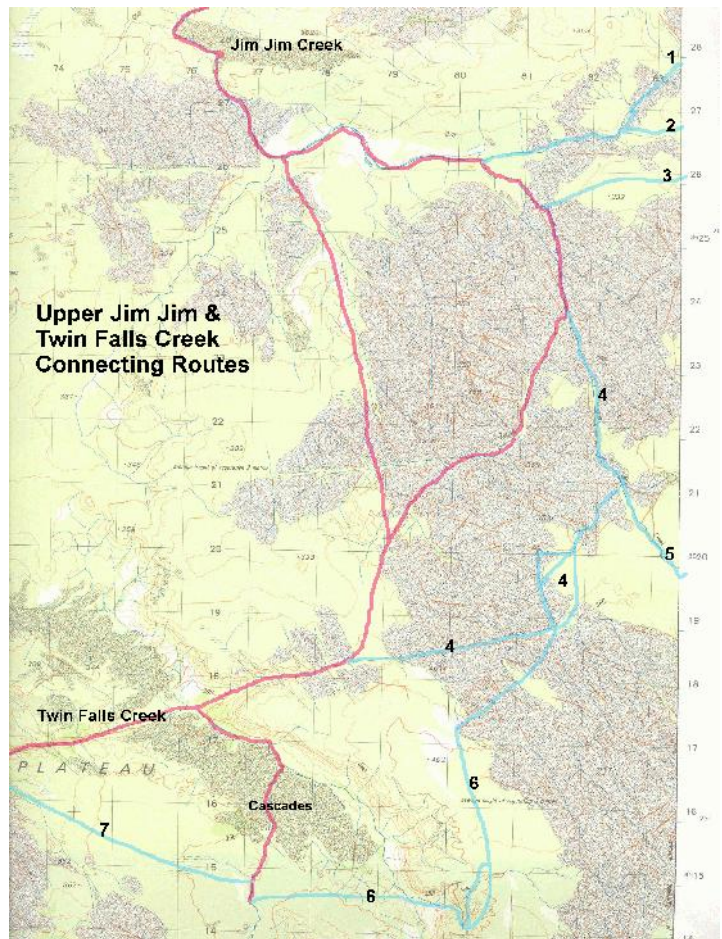


Walking through area 1 is difficult. Walking through area 2 is even harder. If you are as little as 100 metres off, you can lose an hour or more trying to get back onto a passable route. When I couldn't exit via Twin Falls at the end of a two week walk in July 2006, I had to take the group from the Amphitheatre to Anbadjgoran. This proved to be a two day endurance test and pushed one person to his physical limit. It would have been much better if we could have taken an easier route as shown by the blue line. (I have since heard that there is an even easier variation than the one shown.)

Almost all the blue line passes through open woodland. I find it difficult to believe that there is any site that would need to be avoided along this route. It would be an excellent alternative for groups who wanted – or needed – an easier route. The existing route is an interesting one which I'd like to see remain as an approved route, but it would be better if there were an easier alternative. For some bushwalkers, **easier would mean safer**.

The map at right shows another area where minor additions to approved routes could make a great improvement to some walks. The edge of the map is the park boundary. The existing approved routes are shown in red. Possible additions are shown in blue. The area labelled "Cascades" as a series of cascades which, when they are flowing, are the most scenic part of the approved route shown on the map.

I knew a member of a southern bushwalking group who, sometime in the last couple of years, obtained permission from the Northern Land Council to land a helicopter just over the border in Arnhem Land. They hoped to use this for a food drop which would have allowed them to enjoy a leisurely trip, primarily along the approved route connecting Jim Jim and Twin Falls. As close as it is and in spite of the fact that routes like those labelled 1, 2 and 3 primarily pass through open woodland, they couldn't get permission to do so. They had to do a faster, more difficult walk instead.



Bushwalking clubs throughout Australia seem to be having difficulty attracting younger members. The average age of my clients is now over 50. Not being able to have a food drop restricts the walks to younger, fitter people who, in my opinion, are more likely to wander off and go places they shouldn't. It would be good if more older people could get into areas like this.

Route 4 passes through less stone country than the approved route and is likely to be easier – a big advantage if you have a slow group. Route 5 is another open woodland option to get to the Arnhem Land border. I was once told by a southern bushwalker who had done the route that route 6 is quite pretty and offers a good alternative to the approved route. This particular person is fit and fast and, as near as I can tell, felt no hesitation in getting off the approved route on his application to explore areas he thought looked interesting on the map. I wish I could do the same. Finally, route 7 is one which I did many years ago. It is a much easier alternative to the approved route. It passes through open woodland and would make it much easier for slower groups to get to the cascades.

As I said in my submission to the 1996 Draft Bushwalking strategy, **“We don't use other routes because we can't get permission, not because we don't want to use them.”**

If some people can't see a good reason for sticking to the approved routes on their permits, they won't do so. As another example, I recently learned of a club group which walked from Twin Falls to Surprise Falls over the top of the escarpment. I'd love to be able to have a look at the possibilities there but, as a tour operator, I've got too much to lose to stray that far from an approved route. It would keep people further away from a burial site than the approved route, but it's not approved and under the current system, that's the end of the story.

Wet Season Restrictions

Crocodiles. That one word sums up the stated main reason for the ever increasing restrictions. While crocodiles do present an ever increasing danger, a bit of common sense can minimise this danger or avoid it entirely. Unfortunately some people don't use common sense. Combine this with the fact that the traditional Aboriginal owners of a particular area feel responsible if someone is injured or killed on their land and responsible bushwalkers have a problem.

My first commercial trips were in the wet season. Right through the mid 1990's, I had decent wet season bookings. In recent years, I have had very few. The decline is not because people did not enjoy the trips. When we polled our past clients some years ago, 80% of those who had done a wet season trip said that they would consider doing another. The decline is, at least in part, due to the increasing restrictions on what we can and cannot do. I believe that some of these restrictions make sense from a safety point of view. Others go further than necessary. Two examples.

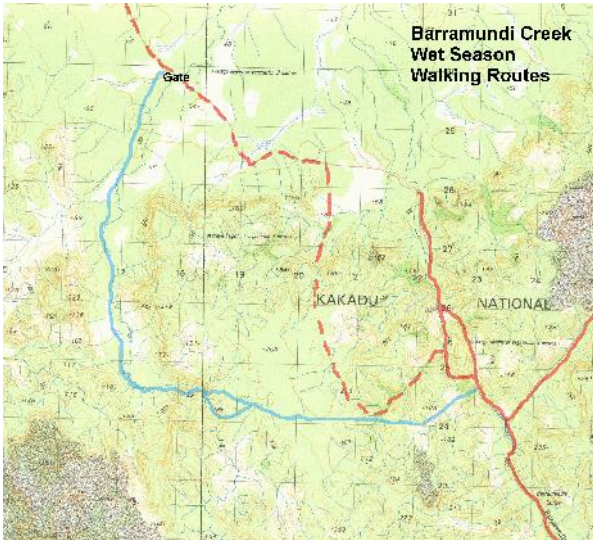
- Our wet season circle routes used to finish at Gunlom. This is no longer permitted because of the possibility of flooding. Instead we have to walk out via Barramundi. It should be possible to set the walk so that it finishes at Gunlom if the water levels are down and at Barramundi if the water levels are up. With satellite phones, we could easily check water levels prior to making the final decision about which route to take over the final two or three days. (We have been permitted to do this on a May trip; why not in February?)
- Jim Jim Track. In the late 1980's and early 1990's it was often possible to drive in or out along the Jim Jim track in May. When the track was closed, it was possible to use bicycles to get in and/or out. In recent years, the track has opened much later and the use of bicycles before the track is open to vehicles is no longer permitted.

During dry spells, the track as far as the jump up is perfectly passable to vehicles. I know this because the need to evacuate a client forced a group I was with to walk out about 30 km in January 2001 to where one of the rangers picked up myself and the person with the problem. I was then allowed to drive back and collect the others. We were not the only vehicles on the road – we saw at least one vehicle being driven by traditional owners. Traditional use appears to be one of the reasons for keeping the road closed for the duration of the Wet. Graveside is closed for one week a month during the Dry for use by traditional owners. Weather permitting, why not do the reverse and open the Jim Jim track to the jump up for one or two days a week (or fortnight) and let people walk the rest of the way and see Jim Jim? I've been there several times during the Wet. If you stay out of the water below the falls, there is no more danger than crossing a street in Jabiru.

Gains to Walking routes

I don't want to be overly negative. Common sense can and does prevail at times.

- Graveside-Surprise. The direct route from the base of the gorge below Surprise Falls to Graveside Creek is one which the Bushwalking Club had used in the 1970's and 1980's. It was left off the original list of approved routes but was eventually reinstated. This allowed us to offer a good loop walk combining the two.
- Barramundi Creek. When large crocodiles began to move into Maguk in the Wet, we were permitted to use a wet season route to avoid crossing Barramundi Creek below the falls. Without this, our wet season program would have virtually disappeared. From our point of view, this was a wonderful decision. It should be possible to improve it further still.



The red lines in the map at left show the approved routes. The dashed red line shows the wet season alternative. Except in extremely wet conditions, the road is in good condition and easy to drive as far at the gate which is kept locked. We have sometimes been permitted to park there, at other times we have had to park closer to the main highway. Having been at the creek next to the gate in the Wet on many occasions, I find it hard to believe that a potentially dangerous crocodile would choose to go there rather than somewhere on Barramundi Creek. Experienced bushwalkers have, however, had their wet season permit applications turned down, officially because of this danger.

The blue line shows a possible alternative which would avoid this while, at the same time, allowing people to reach an area where there is a potentially interesting waterfall. It passes primarily through open woodland. Although I have never done this myself, it appears that it would be at least as easy as the currently approved wet season route.

Bushwalking Publicity

Like it or not, there is an ever increasing amount of information available about Kakadu. Have a look at the image of Twin Falls taken from Google Earth.



You can pick out some individual trees. Images like these are improving all the time. The image above and the current ones (2011) covering this part of the park were taken in 2006. It is only a matter of time before images of the entire park will be available at this resolution or better. My guess is better. Any bushwalker who wishes to do so will be able to map out their route in incredible detail prior to their walk. Some will see features that they will wish to visit, even if those features are not on the route on their permit.

In past years, Kakadu has had a policy of not actively promoting overnight bushwalks. Other than my own brochures and ads, the only publicity overnight bushwalking got was the occasional article in a magazine like *Wild* or in southern bushwalking club newsletters. The publication of the book *Take a Walk in the NT* changed this as it includes a description of the walk from Koolpin to Twin Falls. I suspect that this will increase demand on other routes as well as people from around the country become more aware of what Kakadu has to offer.

Most people will stick to the routes shown on their permits. Others would be more likely to stick to the route if they felt that there was a good reason for doing so. A few will use the route on their permits as a general guide line and wander where they will. Images like those available on Google Earth are going to increase their temptation to stray. A better system would increase the percent of people sticking to the routes on their permits, but the only way to ensure total compliance is to ban private bushwalks entirely or institute aerial surveillance and massive penalties for people who stray from the permitted routes. Both of those would involve a great deal of negative publicity for the park.

One recent proposal from one group of traditional owners was to issue every overnight walking group with a device that tracked their position so Park management could see if they were sticking to their approved route. If carrying such a device meant that more of the park got opened to bushwalking, I'd be happy to see it introduced.

Safety

Safety is a major issue, all the more so when the local people believe that if an accident takes place on their country, it is in some measure, their fault, no matter what the person who had the accident might have been doing at the time. Some years ago, the different levels at the top of Twin Falls were closed to the public because of safety concerns. Now, it appears that Jim Jim may be going the same way. A bulletin sent to tour operators on 29 June 2011 stated, "Walkers have been sighted at the edge of the falls. Please note that walkers are not to proceed beyond the end of the track or cross the creek. It is an offence to do so and poses an extreme risk due to the instability of the rock and the very rugged terrain. We request that operators ensure that they stick to the track and abide by the conditions of their permit."

People have been climbing down to the top of Jim Jim Falls since well before the park was declared. To the best of my knowledge, there has never been a serious accident there. The route which most tour operators (and private individuals) would take is one I have taken many times over the years. If that is unsafe, then to be consistent, park management should close both the walk to the top of Jim Jim and the walk to the top of Twin. Even if tour operators stop climbing down, some private individuals will still do so. Private individuals are less likely to know the best route and more likely to have an accident. There may be cultural reasons why the top of Jim Jim Falls should be closed, but safety is not a valid reason for as long as other walks of similar difficulty remain open.

Two other issues need a special mention: satellite phones and swimming.

It is becoming less and less expensive to hire a satellite phone. We own three and pay as little as \$18 per day to hire others. It may be time to make it mandatory to carry a satellite phone on walks which are out for more than three or four days.

Swimming is one of the things which makes bushwalking in Kakadu so attractive. It is just as safe to swim in most of the pools along the bushwalking routes as it is to swim in the Jabiru Pool. However, as large crocodiles keep expanding their territory, there are a couple of places where I believe swimming should be discouraged. Although I've never seen a large croc in the pool at the bottom of the cascades on Cascades Creek in the Graveside area, I have seen a barramundi. If a barramundi can get there, so can a large croc.

Improving the system – a modest proposal

One of the problems with the current system of approved routes is that **the approved routes are not necessarily the best choices**. Another, larger problem is that if more people realised just how little of the park is actually officially open to the public, it would generate a fair amount of adverse publicity. It would also bring people to the park who would deliberately set out to walk off the approved routes to try and make a point. I believe that the best way to avoid this would be to move to a system of out of bounds areas with more freedom to move off the approved routes in other areas.

Making a change like this overnight is too much to ask. The traditional owners have valid concerns. But, some areas are more sensitive than others. Why not take one or two of the areas in the last four maps in this document (or perhaps some other area) and allow a tour operator like Willis's Walkabouts to wander relatively freely through those areas and prepare a detailed report of what they find. (Given our experience, I think we'd be the ideal choice.)

If we found something that should be avoided on other trips, this could be left out of the places we were permitted to go on future trips. Park management gets a better knowledge of what actually is there and our clients (and, later on, others) get better walks. Everyone wins.

As it now stands, we are not permitted to prepare what I would consider to be a decent report to give to park management. After more than 30 years of walking in Kakadu, I'd be willing to bet that I've seen a few art sites that have not yet been recorded. I don't know which of the sites I know these might be. As I'm not permitted to use a GPS to get an accurate reference, I can't provide an accurate position. Wouldn't it make more sense to have us record the exact location of the sites and report what we find? It's possible that we are going some place(s) that the traditional owners would prefer us not to visit. We can't give precise locations of art sites, so we can't prepare a report which would allow us to find this out. Where's the sense in that?

As a final note, currently (2011) people on commercially guided bushwalks have to sign an agreement saying they won't publish images of any of the art sites they see. People on private walks don't have to sign any such agreement. Where's the sense in that?

Summary

The existing system of approved routes is a historical artefact. The map of approved routes was compiled many years ago using walks already approved for Willis's Walkabouts.

- Some of the routes are harder than they need to be. This is a safety issue.
- The routes do not include many walks that had been done by in the past.
- Some bushwalkers stray well away from the route shown on their permit.
- There is no easy way to get a new route approved, even in areas where it is unlikely that there would be significant sites that needed to be avoided.
- The park would get substantial negative publicity if it were more widely known just how little of it is officially open to bushwalking.

Bushwalking demand is likely to increase.

- The publication of *Take a Walk in the NT* has increased awareness of bushwalking in the park.
- There is a growing number of southern bushwalking clubs which have walked in Kakadu. People telling their friends what their walks were like are going to make some of those friends want to walk here themselves.

- Images like those on *Google Earth* will give some people new reasons to want to get off the approved routes.

The wet season needs a bit of a rethink.

- Safety is an issue, but some of the current restrictions could be eased without affecting safety.
- More people coming in the Wet would improve the viability of the tourist industry in general and of Aboriginal owned enterprises in particular.
- Making some changes sooner rather than later is likely to make it easier to resist inappropriate demands that are likely to arise if nothing is done.

Moving to a system of bushwalking areas rather than approved routes would have a number of benefits.

- It would make it easier to keep groups from crossing paths.
- Spreading people out should minimise the impact on current high use areas.
- Easier walking routes would open several areas to slower or less fit walkers who are excluded by the current system.
- Easier walking routes are safer.
- A group which is having no difficulty with their walk is less likely to stray from the route shown on their permit than one which is having problems.
- As people would still need to nominate routes for permit and safety reasons, they could be steered clear of sites of significance.
- Tour operators could actually go to places that other people are going.

We can help.

- We already report on some of the things we find on our walks.
- Allow us to record (but not publish) the location of art sites and we could report exactly what we find to park management.
- Allow us to explore a bit and prepare a report and park management will have a good idea whether or not the area in question could safely be opened for general bushwalking.

Appendix: Comments on the Tourism Master Plan 2007 – *My comments are in italics. The rest is a direct quote.*

6.6.1 Bushwalking

Outstanding bushwalking opportunities in Kakadu exist for the target market. However, there is scope for improvement in the delivery of bushwalking opportunities, particularly with regard to better marking of day-use tracks.

Currently, walks include short walks, easy day walks and longer, more challenging day walks. Extended overnight walks require high level experience for navigation and conditions including weather and terrain, as well as knowledge of cultural sensitivities and constraints.

The promotion of both day walks and overnight walks in Kakadu needs to be improved so that more people, particularly the ‘experience seeker’, are aware of the walks available and can plan their length of stay and provisioning accordingly. Constraints to the promotion of extended bushwalking include:

- culturally sensitive sites – traditional owners have expressed concern about people walking on country due to the sensitive nature of some parts of country containing sacred sites which have strict rules about who may go to these areas. These areas have restricted access and should not be accessible to bushwalkers. This is often difficult to regulate and relies on the good will of the bushwalkers. *I agree. I’ve mentioned some of the problems in the main document.*
- challenging walking conditions – Kakadu offers a range of bushwalking environments, including terrain which varies from flat open areas to uneven ground covered with dense vegetation and steep, rocky slopes. Navigational experience is essential, and walkers need to be physically fit and adequately prepared to take into consideration the varying seasonal conditions and potential safety risks.

I've taken people in their late 70s on walks of up to three weeks. I often call it , "the world's most comfortable wilderness." A bit of common sense goes a long way.

- some routes require prior experience – existing bushwalking opportunities are limited to experienced walkers who know the approved routes. These routes are generally located in the Mt Brockman Massif and escarpment areas and Yurmikmik and Jarrangbarnmi (Koolpin Gorge) areas.

Anyone with a moderate amount of experience can apply for and receive a permit. If they don't know the approved routes, there are people who will guide them in the right direction. I know of many cases where this has been done.

The following approach is proposed for considering bushwalk classification to assist in streamlining the current process:

- review and revision of the bushwalking strategy
- regular monitoring and review of walking track classifications with the involvement of traditional owners
- development of an efficient and customer-focused bushwalking permit system
- consideration of certification of experienced walkers (such as via clubs) to walk in more remote areas of the park with the alternative of an induction and planning system for independent walkers.

This is going to be a problem. Many young people do a lot of bushwalking with small groups of friends but they won't join a club. If, as suggested, you require some sort of certification for walks of more than two days, I strongly suspect that you'll get people opting out of the system completely. They'll get someone to drop them off in one place and pick them up there or elsewhere later. I've heard of at least one case where this has happened, no permit required from their point of view. I also know several bushwalking clubs which are bitterly opposing the imposition of leadership standards which they do not believe are relevant to their walks.

6.6.2 Development of an iconic walk

Kakadu is best appreciated over a number of days and there has long been support in the bushwalking community for developing at least one world-class walking experience based on culture and landscape, as is found in other World Heritage national parks.

An iconic walk has the potential to deliver a well interpreted and truly memorable experience for the target market. It could provide visitors with choices to link into some segments of the trail rather than complete the entire walk. A walk of this kind would need to be developed through consultation with traditional owners, most likely from several clan groups, and include more than one route for discussion. It would also need to be based on a properly surveyed, marked and more-or-less constructed trail over a route that minimises cultural and environmental impact.

An iconic walk could be appropriate for guided or self-guided visitors. Its management of walker numbers could confine activity to the trail route line and appropriate nearby features. This will enhance safety and avoidance of culturally sensitive areas.

Construction and operation of an iconic walk could be offered to Bininj as a business opportunity, including guiding, maintenance and provision of overnight services. There would also be the option of tour guides providing supported walks, designed around visitor facilities provided at each night's destination to provide a quality experience and minimise the impact of overnight use on the park. This also lessens the need for carting food, cooking gear, overnight and survival equipment.

If an iconic walk is created, it will cost money to maintain. Park management does not have a lot of spare money, so I would guess that the money to maintain the walk would have to come from a fee paid by those who use it. With careful planning, it could be a major asset to the park. But, without proper planning, it would be better not to do it at all.