

From Past to Present: A Study of Photographic Records of Rock Art in Southeast Cape York Peninsula

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Background

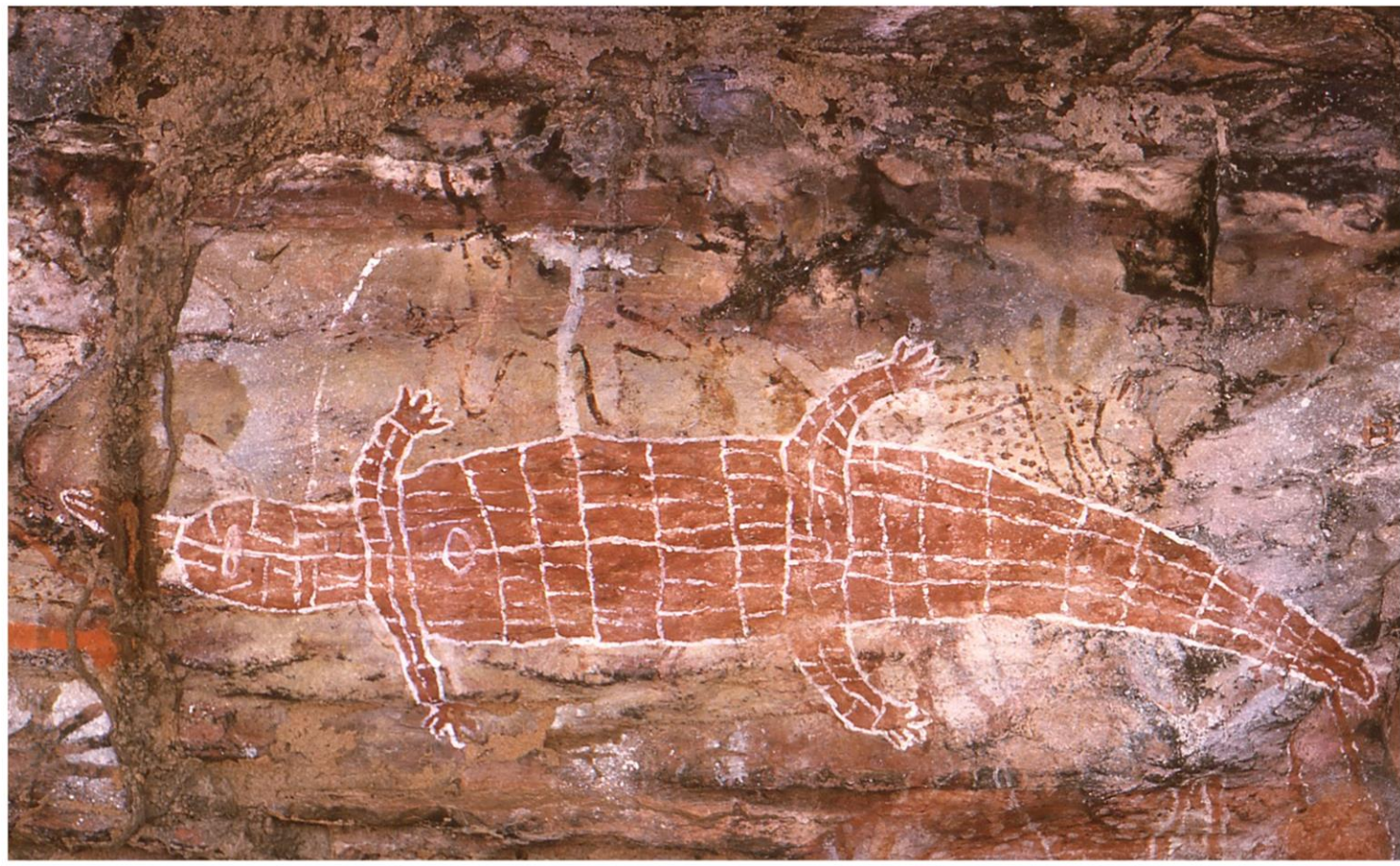
Australian rock art reflects the diverse cultural heritage of one of the world's oldest and richest ongoing cultures. Rock art carries enormous significance as it reflects the way people lived in the past and allows Indigenous knowledge, traditions, and stories to be passed down to future generations.

In the 1960s, Percy Trezise began to document the diverse rock art of the Laura region (Trezise 1971). Photos taken by Trezise and various researchers over the years led to the development of the Southeast Cape York Peninsula Photographic archive, which spans from the 1960s to 2022.

Three rock art sites, Split Rock, Mushroom Rock, and Giant Horse, were selected for analysis. Here, the results for Mushroom Rock are presented as a case study.



Can you spot any changes to this motif?



1967



1994



2012



2017



2022

Why analyse this photographic archive?

The local custodians of these sites, the Laura Rangers and Laura community Elders, voiced concern over the conservation state of these sites, which are open for public visitation, given the increased tourism the region has experienced in recent decades.

Photographic monitoring is frequently recommended as a tool for site management and rock art conservation (Franklin 2014). However, there is a lack of results regarding the long-term outcomes of using photographic monitoring and archives.

Case Study: Mushroom Rock

The photos on the right show the 55-year record for the Bichrome crocodile motif at Mushroom Rock. This is only one example of the records that also exist for motifs at Split Rock and Giant Horse.

Methods

Updated photos were taken in July 2022 during fieldwork. Motifs from each site were then scaled in Photoshop and compared from the earliest 'baseline' photo up until 2022.

Results

- Rock art appears to be stable in the current environment.
- No major spalling or cracking is evident for this motif.
- Key impacts stem from termite and mud wasp activity.
- Evidence of a black microorganism colonising the rock shelter.
- No major evidence of degradation via tourist impacts such as graffiti.

Discussion

Through finding the macroscopically visible changes at this rock art site, as apparent in the detailed photographic record, factors impacting rock art at Mushroom Rock were identified. The level of change that has occurred to this motif over time is evident from this analysis. There is a large mud wasp nest first appearing in 2012, that is impacting the lower leg of the motif. A termite track has damaged the art where it passes over the snout of the crocodile, which is present from 1967 to 2022. In the crevices of the shelter there is a black microorganism found in areas likely associated with water runoff. It is currently unknown what this substance or microorganism is and how it may impact the art in the future. The degradation factors impacting this motif can then be monitored to ensure the rock art is preserved into the future.

Conclusions

From analysing this record, valuable information on the key factors impacting rock art sites in Laura has been gained. This shows the unparalleled value of the southeast Cape York Peninsula photographic archive and the insightful benefits of long-term photographic monitoring.

Using records like this, it is possible to assess the state of rock art over time.

Future Prospects

Identifying specific factors impacting the rock art at these sites in Laura makes it possible to make informed, site-specific management and conservation decisions. The results of this study could be used in a review of the current management strategies and for future conservation purposes.

Acknowledgements

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References

- Trezise, P.J. 1971 *Rock Art of Southeast Cape York*. Canberra: Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies.
- Franklin, N.R. 2014 Monitoring change at Indigenous rock art sites in Australia. *Australian Archaeology* 79(1):65–76.