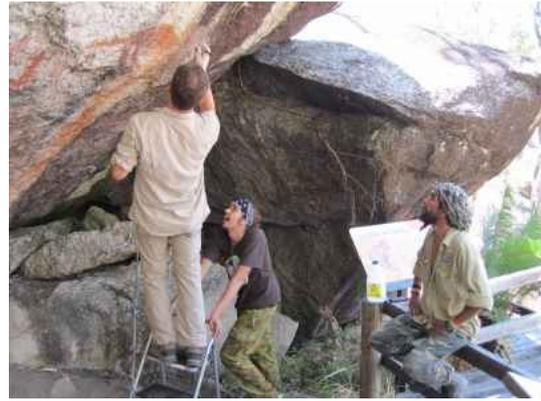


Preserving Aboriginal Rock Art

Our local Aboriginal tribe is Bulwai, which is part of the Djabugai clan. While the Djabugai lived in the rainforest country around Kuranda which is World Heritage today, the Bulwai lived mostly in the open forest country just to the west, namely the Clohesy river, the Davies creek and Emerald creek areas.

Bulwai country includes the 'Bare Hill' rock art site, which was dated by James Cook University scientists to be at least 3500 years old, as old as the pyramids in Egypt.



Willie and Aden Brim watch Jürgen Steiner airbrushing



Ganandoran

The central figure on the main rock face is Ganandoran. According to Bulwai legends Ganandoran was badly burned by two women and he came here to die. Since the burning was accidental, Bulwai women decided to give birth at this rock. Some of the images on the rock are of women giving birth, but most of these have been lost or are badly faded. The rock seat where Aboriginal mothers have given birth for thousands of years is still clearly visible and just above it it has the best image of a woman giving birth.

Bare Hill is not just one of the few sites where birth is depicted, but it is also the only known rock art site depicting kangaroos with an open mouth.

Sadly some of the rock art has been lost and most of it is threatened, which is mainly due to moisture causing several problems.

The most obvious is the growth of algae which is stimulated by moisture. As you can see clearly on the image on the right wherever water is running down the rock face black algae growth is so prolific that it has covered any Aboriginal paintings which might have been in those sections. But even where there is no water running down the rock face, moisture from the air is allowing algae to grow on the rock face.

The less obvious issue is that moisture is actually penetrating the rock. This moisture in the rock expands and contracts as the rock heats up under the sun and then cools again at night. This constant change widens tiny cracks which allows more moisture in and so on. Ultimately the top layer of rock will flake off (typically about 3-10mm thick). This means the permanent loss of any ochre art on top of that particular flake.

This is where Willie Brim, Gaby Schierenbeck, Ferdinand Karl and Jürgen Steiner come into the story. In 2006 Gaby introduced filmmaker Ferdinand Karl to local elder Willie Brim. Ferdinand shot some footage for his "Australian Diary" with Willie at the 'Bare Hill' site. On this footage, Willie pointed out the poor state of the ancient rock art and asked for someone to help to preserve the artwork.

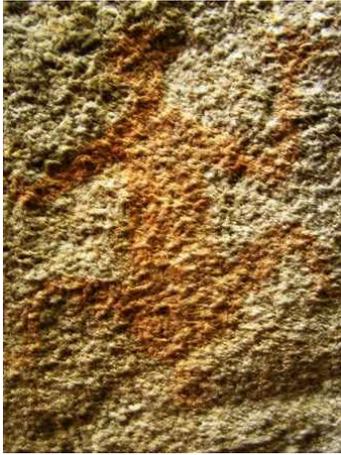
Willie previously asked the Australian government for help, but to no avail.

Luckily another friend of Ferdinand, Jürgen Steiner has a business in Austria to restore rock floors in castles and churches which are affected by moisture. Jürgen agreed to come to Australia and have



Jürgen Steiner pointing to a red kangaroo head with open mouth, a larger white roo head is over his arm

a look at the threatened rock art to see what he can do.



Woman giving birth

After over three years of analysis and preparation, a plan was finalised and in October 2009 Jürgen Steiner used an airbrush to blow low-molecular silicic acid dissolved in alcohol onto the rock. This mix is able to penetrate the rock to a depth of about 5-7 cm, filling minute cracks in the rock, thus binding and stabilising the rock.

Since the ochre used by Aboriginal people is thousands of years old, it is so dry and hardened that it does not react with the alcohol. So the rock is stabilised without any loss of ochre. Jürgen was even able to wipe over the ochre immediately after application without any smearing or any ochre wiping off.

Jürgen is confident that this treatment will preserve the rock art for many decades and initial measurement are very promising. The humidity in the rock has decreased from about 50% to about 15% within the first two weeks. As you can see from the images, Jürgen

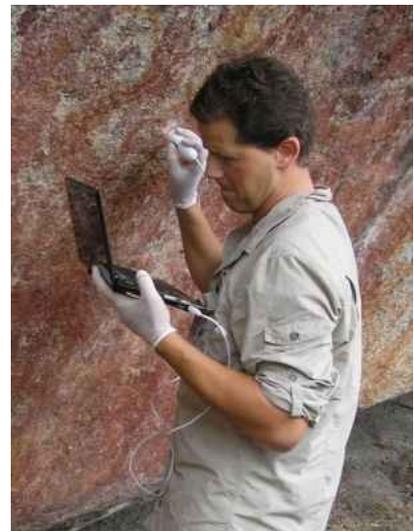
also cleaned away the black algae from some areas and on the right hand side of the main site this exposed the previously hidden head of a kangaroo.

It is wonderful that this significant site has been saved from the ravages of time and water.

This is probably the first ever such effort to preserve Aboriginal art in Australia and I wish to thank Willie, Ferdinand, Gaby and especially Jürgen for volunteering their time and making this happen.

Jürgen Steiner and everyone else involved in this project have worked for free and have even covered the significant expenses out of their own pockets, but they obviously cannot keep doing this.

However there are many more important art sites, not just in this area but all over Australia. Jürgen would be happy to teach others his knowledge about how to preserve Aboriginal rock art, but what is really needed is a sponsor or some government money or maybe a university to continue this important work. If you can help in any way, please contact us.



Jürgen Steiner measuring rock moisture