

# An ecologist looks at kangaroo myths

In central Australia, the red kangaroo represents far more than an important source of food.



According to Aboriginal legends, the kangaroo was one of the spiritual ancestors who in the beginning created the landscape and its wildlife, and who are repeatedly reborn within people.

In the myths of the northern Aranda tribe, for example, the great red kangaroo sire Krantjirinja gave rise not only to all modern red kangaroos, but also to those members of the tribe belonging to the red kangaroo totem.

Dr Alan Newsome of the CSIRO Division of Wildlife Research has studied both the myths and the ecology of the red kangaroo and has come to the conclusion that some intriguing details of the Aranda legends grew out of good understanding of the animal's natural history.

In his investigations, Dr Newsome pieced together clues gathered from various sources over a number of years. His interest was first aroused by the Aranda chants and maps published by the late Professor Theodore Strehlow, whom he met in 1969.

As a child, Professor Strehlow had lived among the Aranda and been so fully adopted that the men even revealed many of their legends to him. Like many Aboriginal tribes, the Aranda guard their

myths religiously, and only rarely are selected white people allowed to learn any details. Any member of the tribe who divulges secrets carelessly risks death for abusing tribal beliefs and offending the totemic ancestors.

After one section of the Aranda tribe had died out, however, Professor Strehlow published a number of their legends, including the Krantji myths, named after the sacred site where Krantjirinja appeared out of the earth and near which he spent all his life.

## Clues in sacred chants

Dr Newsome was already familiar with the published myths when, 100 km north-east of Alice Springs, Pastor Paul Albrecht introduced him to Lame Tom Etaralakaka, an old member of the Unmatjira tribe, who are relatives of the Aranda and speak a similar language.

As a special honour, Lame Tom sang parts of his sacred legend, and gave Dr

Newsome permission to send a tape recording to Professor Ken Hale of Massachusetts Institute of Technology for translation, on condition that nobody else heard it. Professor Hale had visited the tribe and won their trust.

When Dr Newsome read the translation, he was surprised to find that some verses were identical to sections of the Krantji myths.

Another Aborigine, introduced to Dr Newsome simply as Old George, supplied more information about the legends, as well as the names and approximate locations of several totemic sites featured in the Krantji myths, and some years later two more Aborigines, Nose-peg Tjonkata and Shorty Lungkata, who lived 150 km west of Alice Springs, filled in further details of the same group of legends.

All the sacred sites mentioned in these myths lie north of the MacDonnell Ranges. After rain, red kangaroos, which are nomadic, forage over much of the area — in savannah woodland, along watercourses that run out of the hills, over the broad grassy plains flanking the range, and in the adjoining mulga scrub.

*Why did the ancestral kangaroos travel supernaturally? Dr Newsome has an ecological explanation.*

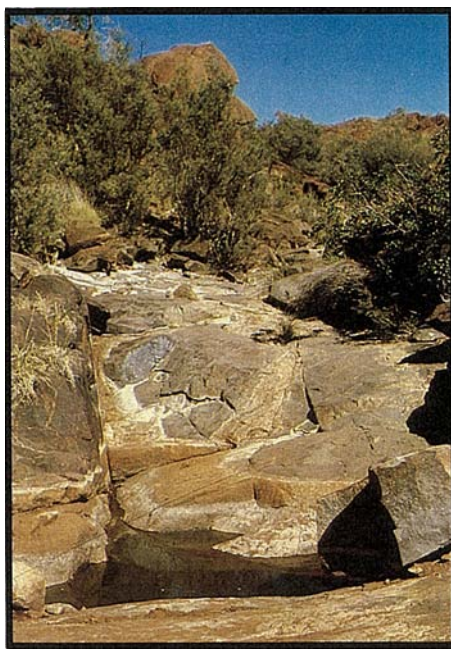
## Favourable habitat

Red kangaroos need shade and fresh pasture, especially grasses, and in dry years they withdraw from parts of their range as their food disappears, until extreme drought restricts them to those watercourses and open plains where some green grass persists.

Dr Newsome located 15 sacred sites, and was struck by the fact that all were in or near favourable kangaroo habitat. He was also impressed by several features of the rites traditionally enacted at Krantji, where the Aranda performed ceremonies to ensure plentiful game. The celebrants left their weapons at a distance, indicating homage and peace to the god-ancestors, then approached the site in silence, feeling their way along the rock-face with their eyes shut.

At the site itself, the Aranda struck the sacred rocks representing the ancestors, for legend held that every dislodged grain would spring up as a kangaroo at the next rain.

Surely it is no accident, Dr Newsome argues, that this ceremony was carried out close to the very habitat to which kangaroos retreated during long spells of



Limestone deposited on rocks in the MacDonnell Ranges. The sacred site Krantji shows similar features.



dry weather, and from which they would disperse once more when grass abounded. The Aborigines observed the behaviour of red kangaroos closely and, suggests Dr Newsome, appear to have woven this knowledge into their myths.

Supernatural journeys

The most striking link between myth and ecology arose from the legends that tell the brave deeds of the kangaroo ancestors. The two main kangaroo ‘dreamings’ recount journeys from Ajaii in the western MacDonnell Ranges, and in both stories the ancestors were spirited over at least part of the distance by supernatural means.

In one legend, Kolakola (‘joey kangaroo’) was swept eastwards by a great wind to Kitjitjira, and in the other, Kolakola travelled underground with a mob of fellow-avengers to kill a devil-kangaroo at Arangurunja, to the north-east of Ajaii.

Dr Newsome points out that in their other journeys the legendary kangaroos travelled overland in the normal way, but these two expeditions were unusual, for they crossed big tracts of unfavourable habitat; Kitjitjira lies 120 km from Ajaii, along a stretch of the range flanked mostly by desert, and the journey to Arangurunja is even more forbidding.

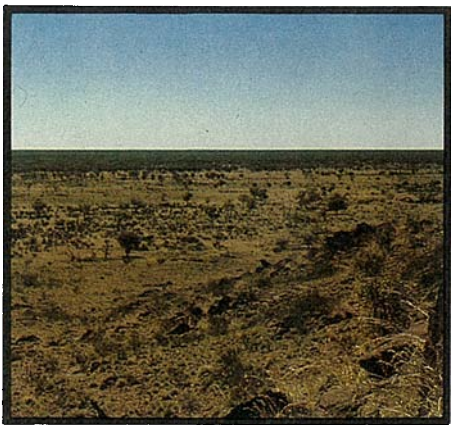
When he questioned his Aboriginal informants, Dr Newsome found they could not explain why the ancestral kangaroos had travelled supernaturally; it was just part of the legend.

Dr Newsome has an ecological explanation: from Kitjitjira to Araperka is, he says, ‘far and away the best-watered and most fertile land in the region’, and the legend therefore depicts the kangaroos voyaging normally by day. ‘The underground legend, on the other hand, underlies mostly desert.’ Once again, in creating their legends the ancient Aborigines had taken into account the ecology of the kangaroo.

The white man brought dams and bores, and therefore permanent water, to previously arid stretches of this region. Ecological studies have shown that red kangaroos benefited less from the water itself than from the changed pastures of the rangelands, greener now because cropped by sheep and cattle.

Smaller animals

Smaller macropods (members of the kangaroo family), such as the spectacled hare-wallaby and Lesuer’s rat-kangaroo, fared less well, becoming scarce or extinct with the disappearance of the long grass in which they had sheltered.

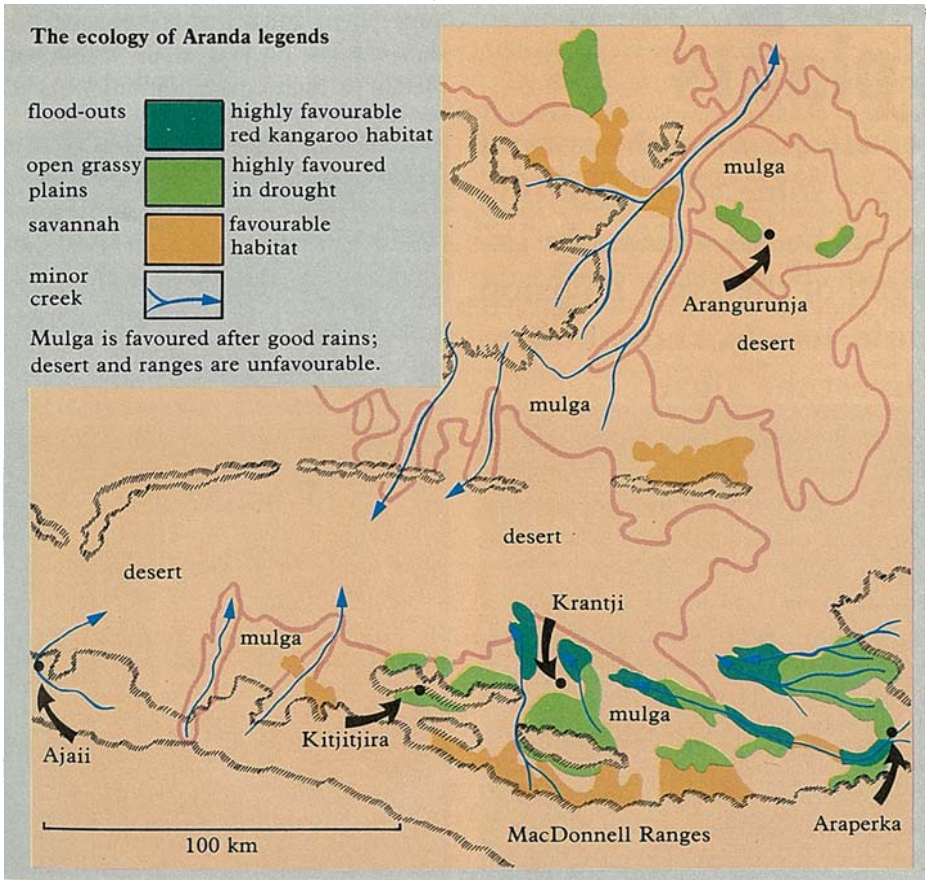


Kangaroo grazing land stretching north-east from the Ranges near Krantji.

These species, too, inspired their own myths, but, just as the red kangaroo was the only macropod to remain abundant, so the legends surrounding it were the only ones to survive.

Natural selection shapes not only the ecological community, it seems, but also the legends associated with it.

*All the sacred sites were in or near favourable kangaroo habitat.*



According to Aranda chants, the ancestral kangaroos made two supernatural journeys from Ajaii: underground to Arangurunja and through the air to Kitjitjira. Both journeys crossed unfavourable habitat.

The sacred site of Krantji held a central place in northern-Aranda lore, and Dr Newsome was keen to find it. The Aborigines to whom Dr Newsome spoke had never been there, but one described it as like a cave, and the chants included vivid images of the site: ‘Our rock-plate of white fat ... our windbreak home of white fat, our windbreak home that gleams like sand.’

After a search, Dr Newsome came across a tiny soak hidden in a small, narrow horizontal cleft adjacent to a large rock-plate ‘gleaming white’ from a fine coating of limestone deposited by seepage and evaporation. He is sure that he has found Krantji.

The Aranda no longer hunt the plains or strike the rock for plentiful game, but Dr Newsome nonetheless believes the site deserves respect and protection, and he has not divulged its exact position.

John Seymour

More about the topic

The ecomythology of the red kangaroo in central Australia. A.E. Newsome. *Mankind*, 1981, 12, 327–33. ‘Aranda Traditions.’ T.G.H. Strehlow. (Melbourne University Press: Melbourne 1947.)