

# Dr Jim Birckhead

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*Story by Margrit Beemster*

THE current resources boom, which has mining companies seeking iron ore and other minerals such as zircon, gold and copper in remote parts of Australia, has paved the way for anthropologist Dr Jim Birckhead to be involved in a search of another kind.

Jim, a retired lecturer from Charles Sturt University, has become a 'story-seeker.' It is his job to do ethnographic surveys, to look for 'story', when assessing proposed mining or other sites on behalf of organisations that represent Indigenous interests. Since September last year, he has conducted 15 surveys, mostly in the Pilbara region of Western Australia, and in the Nullarbor.



*Jim (centre) with a goanna and representatives of the Palyku people in the Pilbara.*

Jim, a gently spoken American, moved to Australia in 1976 to take up a position as an anthropology lecturer with what was the Goulburn College of Advanced Education (now CSU). He is now an adjunct research fellow with CSUs Institute for Land, Water and Society.

"There's a lot of travel but also a real sense of adventure," says Jim. "I'm having the opportunity to put the theory I taught for years into practice. It's a wonderful and exciting experience. But conditions can be pretty basic and I try to avoid the cyclone season. Fortescue Metal Group lost two employees in Cyclone George last year and an archaeologist I know was found unconscious and is still recovering."

For Jim, who lives on a 20ha farm near Mt Pilot with his family, wife Wendy and three children, his shortest trip over to the west was a four

hour visit. The maximum time away from home is usually two weeks.

He agrees his life can become very surreal as he changes environments. "On one survey the guys had caught five goannas and cooked them," he recounts. "We were all sitting around a fire under the BHP railway bridge with 3km long ore train going by, eating goanna with Helga bread, drinking Zero coke and listening to Slim Dusty. The very next day I'm on a jumbo jet flying from Perth to Sydney, watching the latest movie drinking a glass of chardonnay! Or else I could be out in the field in that red, rocky, spinnifex country and the next day I'm writing up a report at the corporate headquarters in Perth."

Sometimes he has advance warning that he is required out west, but it is not unusual for Jim to get a call at 5 o' clock on a Friday evening to ask if he can be on a plane at 6am the following Monday. When Jim is required in the Pilbara region he flies from Albury – Sydney - to Perth, and then on to either Port Hedland or Newman, which is about 14 hours of travel.

When he arrives he is picked up by someone from one of the various mining companies that operate in the region, and taken to a 'donga' (the colloquial term for the temporary pre-fabricated buildings that the mining companies have had shipped in to accommodate their workers) to rest up before he goes out in the field, often early the next morning.

The day starts with a meeting in the office where Jim is briefed, given a 'scope of works' he is to complete over the next few days, and shown maps of the areas he is to assess. The areas aren't necessarily just for proposed mines and can be for things like new railway lines, widening existing roads, trenching, water targets and new port facilities. Next the rest of the survey team (the traditional owners of the land who have made native title claims over the country) are picked up and they go out to visit the sites.

Jim is a casual anthropologist with an Adelaide-based subcontractor, Australian Cultural Heritage Management, who has contracts with representative bodies such as the Pilbara Native Title Service who represent the five or six different claimant groups in the area including the Palyku, Nyiparli and Kariyarra peoples. However it is the mining companies such as FMG, Rio Tinto, Pilbarra Iron, Woodside, and Iluka that handle all the logistics, as it is in their best interest to have the surveys done as quickly as possible.

"Sometimes you are under a fair bit of pressure from the companies who want to know whether or not they can go ahead and start drilling, as while the rigs are sitting around it is costing them \$100,000 a day in delayed work time," says Jim.

Jim's demeanour and previous experience in working with Indigenous people (his research career has focussed on Australia's Indigenous people and he was actively involved in the Native Title Claim by the Githabul people from Northern NSW) stands him in good stead with his current work. He has got to know the elders from the various groups well. Some of them are old stockmen who used to work on the big stations and "really know country well." They are in their 70s, 80s, and there are even two who are 93 and 97.



"The fact that I have some grey hairs and a beard helps," says Jim. (pictured above). "In that culture age carries weight. They would see a 22 year old graduate as 'just a boy.' They don't make a big deal out of it but they prefer to work with a mature person. But I'm still considered young in cultural terms as I haven't been through the Law, the different stages of initiation. And that's the thing about the old guys. They have been through the Law and a lot of the younger ones haven't. The younger ones can't speak for country as the older ones can."

Jim says some of the work he does in the Pilbara is 'men's work only'; in other parts of the Pilbara he works with a female anthropologist and they do both 'men's and women's work.' In the Nullarbor the surveys are mixed. Jim explains that under Heritage Legislation in Western Australia and South Australia before a mining company can disturb a site, both archaeological and ethnographic surveys need to be carried out. Usually the surveys are carried out concurrently. The archaeological survey identifies any sacred sites or artefacts; the ethnographic one whether any 'story' such as song lines, dreaming tracks or mythological significance is attached to a particular area.

"There are certain song lines like the Seven Sisters that go right across Australia and include the Pilbara and right down to Port Augusta in South Australia," says Jim. "Everyone agrees there will be no mining in that part of the Pilbara, that it is a really important site."

Jim says it is a lot more difficult to define the ethnographic value of a site (which can be whole mountain ranges with the valleys in between) compared to its archaeological value.

"For example for one survey with these old guys we looked at 77 previously recorded archaeological sites and for all of the sites, the old guys told me there was 'no story' associated with the site," he says. "So there were no ethnographic reasons why the development couldn't go ahead though there were some archaeological ones."

Jim says, if there is a story is associated with a site, he is only told about it in general terms. "But often we don't find story...which is an easy outcome," he says. "If there is a story the reports I have to do are a lot more complicated and include the basis of the story, which area it encompasses, is it possible to work out buffer zones around the area etc."

While Jim is involved in other work including a research project for a CSIRO funded project addressing the economic and cultural value of water to Indigenous people in the River Murray region, it is the consultancy work for mining companies that is keeping him more than busy at the present time.

"There's a shortage of anthropologist in Australia and because of the current mining boom we are in high demand," he says. "When I retired from teaching I never imagined, based as I am at Albury-Wodonga, that I would be commuting to the far west to work in the mining industry."

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