



NUKUNU, the people of the Southern Flinders Ranges

April 29 to May 2, 2025

The purposes of the Expedition

The expedition was a follow-up to and extension of the first visit to Nukunu country coordinated by Tim and Jen Tolley in 2021.

The aim of the expedition was to explore Nukunu culture, land management, (including seasonal movement through the landscape), the central importance of water and Warkalitya (Mount Remarkable), and the impact of colonisation on the Nukunu people and their culture.

Key Personnel

- Dr Jared Thomas, former South Australian Museum Curator of Aboriginal Material Culture and Art, and current Adelaide University Coordinator of Indigenous Collections and Archives.
- Travis Thomas, Chair of the Nukunu Wapma Thura Aboriginal Corporation (the relevant Native Title representative body). Travis is a serving police officer and a CFS captain and, with Jared, a lead negotiator with government and bureaucracy about matters pertaining to Nukunu land ownership and use.
- Anita Thomas, a marine biologist with the Nature Conservancy, and Chair of the Society for Ecological Restoration Australasia. Anita has led restoration of a key Nukunu site and is an expert on the ecology of the Spencer Gulf and, of relevance to this expedition, its role as a Nukunu food source.

Other Personnel

- Tess McCallum, Collections Coordinator for the Melrose Historical Society and Museum, and a member of a local farming family. Tess joined us for the first two days to learn more about Nukunu, and arranged access to Nukunu shelter trees on her father-in-law's property.
- Malcom Mackinnon, film maker.

The Timing of the Expedition

The expedition was timed for late April/early May, to take advantage of (somewhat) cooler weather, and to allow accommodation providers to recover from the Easter break, during which Melrose is flooded with mountain bike enthusiasts.

Accommodation and Catering

Members stayed at Under the Mount (UTM) and the Melrose Holiday Units.

UTM also catered for breakfast on each morning, and we were able to use their kitchen/recreation room for showing films.

Evening meals were at the North Star and Mount Remarkable hotels, and lunch and morning teas on the third and fourth days were provided through Over The Edge, a local café attached to a mountain bike shop.

Lunch on day 2 was provided by the Melrose Historical Society.

All of the accommodation and catering providers were extremely helpful and gave excellent service.

Activities

Day 1

- Check In
- Initial meeting at UTM



Anita Thomas addressing the initial meeting (with Jared left and Travis right)

Walk/drive to the Melrose monument overlooking the Willochra Plain for an introduction to Nukunu country.



At the Melrose monument

- Two short films, one on cultural burning (the traditional cool burn approach to maintaining the health and productivity of country) and one on a significant water release from the Baroota Reservoir, which had revived the ecology of the Baroota Creek.

Day 2

- Walk to the south end of Melrose. Jared and Travis talk about the significance of Warkalitya, and its role as the major watershed of the region.
- Walk along Willochra Creek to look at a traditional ochre pit and hear about how it had been restored (project led by Anita Thomas in collaboration with Trees for Life and Nukunu).



The Melrose ochre pit

- Visit to Melrose Museum and lunch in the Paradise Gardens, catered for by the Melrose Historical Society.
- Drive a little way north of Melrose to look at Nukunu shelter trees¹ on the property of Tess McCallum's family. Observation and discussion of farming practices and their impact on the landscape.

¹ Large eucalypts that have been carved (physically and using fire) on their northern side to provide shelter from prevailing weather.



Jared and one of the magnificent shelter trees

- Goyder's Line historical plaque - discussion about forecasts that the line (which marks the limit of sustainable agriculture) will move much further south due to the effects of climate change.



Jared, Travis and Tess McCallum at the Goyder's Line plaque

- Ripple Rocks geological site south of Melrose.
- Showing of "Close to the Bone", a film by Jared Thomas and Malcolm Mackinnon. The film focuses on the journey of Mike Brown (brother of the former Premier Dean Brown) to understand his family's role in a frontier massacre. Discussion with Jared and Malcolm.

Day 3

- Drive to Wilmington to visit a plot of land given to Nukunu by Zarna Carter. Site of cultural burning to restore the landscape to health. Role of *Acacia victoriae* in producing highly nutritious bread.



Cultural Burning Introduction



Acacia victoriae

- Hancock's Lookout (access from Horrocks Pass) to view Spencer Gulf and ranges west of Warkalinya.



"Fearless leaders" at Hancock's Lookout

- Port Germein – discussion of ecology of the Gulf, impact of climate change on mangroves and saltbush marshes, flow of freshwater creeks from watershed.
- Baroota Reservoir and Baroota Creek, effect of dam on health of the creek and the impact of recent water release. History of Baroota reservation. Contemporary farming using creek water and effect on country.



At Baroota Reservoir

- Short film on Nukunu country and restoration projects. Q&A with Jared and Travis.

Day 4

- Laura Lookout to view southern end of Willochra Plain.

- Beetaloo Reservoir – walk to top of dam wall.



Jean, Travis, Jared (and Joanna) at Beetaloo Reservoir

- Lunch, thanks and departure for Adelaide



Lunch at Beetaloo



Group photo before departure – Beetaloo picnic ground

Major Themes

- We asked participants for their perspectives on the major themes of the expedition. A selection of their responses is in the appendix.

Reflections – successes, lessons for the future

- The expedition was a success, with excellent feedback about the content and organisation
- Participants described the expedition as “transformative”, “thoroughly enjoyable”, “a wonderful, informative few days”, “excellent trip”, “an emotional rollercoaster, but came home with hope in my heart”. “Getting locals involved was good and seeing the ‘impact’ Jared and Travis had on Tess McCallum was wonderful.” “Jared and Travis were excellent ambassadors.”
- We two also came home with more hope about the future, particularly in relation to the place of Aboriginal Australians (especially after the experience of the Voice referendum) – seeing the extraordinary sophistication of our Nukunu fellow citizens and the warm response of participants.
- Travis and Jared invited participants to attend future cultural burns/water releases.

Acknowledgements

- We acknowledge the Nukunu people, on whose land this expedition took place.
- Especially Jared, Travis and Anita Thomas, who made the expedition a memorable experience.

- Kristen Norton at Under the Mount and Trevor Howell at Melrose Holiday Units. They were generous and welcoming hosts and we would highly recommend both places for anyone visiting the region. Kristen and her staff also provided generous (one could say “huge”) breakfasts.
- Kerri-Lee Bruce at Over the Edge. Kerri provided cakes for two morning teas, lunch wraps for Port Germein and some extraordinary Ploughman’s Platters for our final day.
- Nadine Garrard at the North Star Hotel and Desiree De Brenni at the Mount Remarkable Hotel. Both were very helpful and responsive, and also provided a special menu for one of our members with a restricted diet. Nadine has just retired after 13 years at the North Star and will be a loss to the region.
- Tess McCallum, Melrose Historical Society – Tess was very helpful in the planning stages of the expedition and joined us for a couple of days. She was very keen to learn more about Nukunu and to understand the role of the Museum in telling their stories.
- Wayne Gaskon, National Parks Wirrabarra, for facilitating access to Beetaloo Reservoir when it was closed for shooting.
- Malcolm Mackinnon, film maker, for travelling to Melrose to join the discussion of Close to the Bone.
- Tim Tolley and Alastair and Rose Dow, who guided us through WHC processes and gave advice on expedition management.
- Natalie Rollinson, who as always was a fount of knowledge and a great support.
- Jen Tolley, Rose Dow and Jared Thomas for additional photos
- The Club members who came on the expedition, who were, without fail, positive, engaged, friendly, and supportive.