

Understanding the country

When Anangu (our people) look at the landscape we pay close attention to landforms, soils, plants, animals, water supply and fire history. We understand the country. We know how to use plants and can read the tracks of animals. We understand the significance of weather changes. Our knowledge and our responsibility to care for the country and its wildlife comes from Tjukurpa (our law).

From Uluru-Kata Tjuta Cultural Centre text

Seasons

'Anangu don't go by Piranpa dates, we only go by our own seasons... We know which fruits and foods we get during our seasons - that's what is important to us.'

Barbara Tjikatu, traditional owner

Piriyakutu/piriya piriya is when the piriya comes, a warm steady wind from the north and west (usually August/September). Animals



breed and food plants flower, fruit and seed. Hibernating reptiles come out. Sometimes this season is called kaliny-kalinypa when the kaliny-kalinypa (honey grevillea) flowers. Anangu can then make sweet drinks from the nectar of the flower.

Mai wiyaringkupai/kuli is the really hot time when food finishes (around December). There is maṛutjara (storm clouds) and lightning, but little rain.

Itjanu/inuntji is when utawari, (overcast clouds) usually bring rain (January-March). Lots of food plants flower at this time.

Wanitjunkupayi is the beginning of cold weather. Reptiles hibernate.

Tjuntalpa clouds start around April, but usually don't bring rain. They come from the south mainly by westerly winds. Tjuntalpa sit low over the hills until late in the day.



Wari is the cold time (late May, June, July). There is nyingga (frost) and kulyarpa (mist or dew) every morning, but little rain.

'Anangu are teaching the Rangers and scientists about the animals and plants of the Park. Showing them where to look, telling them about animals and the kind of burrows they have, what they eat, everything. Only Anangu know all this.'

From Uluru-Kata Tjuta Cultural Centre

Habitats

Anangu recognise habitats in their own way. They understand the relationships between the land, plants and animals. They know when and where to find particular foods.

Puli – rocky areas, gorges, stony slopes

Only plants that can survive in shallow, barren soils live here. Anangu burn around puli to protect it from wildfires. Many animals come to drink or shelter in puli, but return to other habitats to graze and breed. Kanyala (euro), tjilkamaṯa (echinida) and arutju (fat-tailed antechinus) are found here. Lots of birds come to get water in rocky areas after rain including ipuru (spinifex pigeon).

Karu – creekline and run-off plains

Anangu usually find good supplies of water here. Although the creeks are normally dry, waterholes can remain for months. People dig for water along the creek beds. Here they can get grass seeds such as kalṯu-kalṯu (native millet) and wangunu (naked woollybutt). Anangu also collect firewood and timber for carving tools from the muur-muurpa (bloodwood) and iṯara (river red gum).

Puti – open woodlands

After good rain, where the ground is hard and sometimes stony, kapi tjintjira (freshwater claypans) form. Animals come to drink from here. Puti wanari is flat country where there is thick wanari (mulga). The ground storey can be spinifex or other grasses. After rain lots of food plants are available and tjala (honey-ants) start making their nests. When nigu (bilby) were around they could be found eating lots of maku (witchetty Grubs) and tjala in puti. Maḷu (red kangaroo) come here when good feed is available. Kanyala (euro) use the rocky areas. There are many animal burrows: pintjaṯanpa (rabbit), mingkiri mice/small dasyurids) and tarkawara (spinifex hopping-mouse).

Pila – spinifex plains, low areas between dunes. Many kurkara (desert oaks) grow in pila – the most common habitat in the Park. When tjanpi (spinifex) is old, with a ring in the middle, Anangu burn it to allow new growth. Trees and shrubs such as kurkara (desert oaks), watarka (umbrella bush) and muur-muurpa (bloodwood) provide seeds for animals and people to eat. Many 'honey plants' such as kaliny-kalinyapa (honey grevillea) are common here. Some of the animals of the pila are tarkawara (spinifex hopping-mouse), mutingka and muluny-mulunyapa

(striped skinks), kuniya (woma python), lungkata (centralian blue tongue lizard), tjakura (giant desert skink), kalaya (emu), kipara (bustard), tuuka (fox) and ngaya (cat).

Tali – sand dunes

This habitat is very fragile. Spinifex and green shrubs such as pukara (desert thryptomene) and watarka (umbrella bush) grow here. Plants like walkalpa (emu poison bush) and nyitu (nut bush) grow on the sand dunes. In the mornings you can see networks of tracks on the sand dunes. Many of the animals of the tali protect themselves by burrowing into the sand. Generally, the small mammals that live in pila are also found in tali. Itjaritjari (marsupial mole) is likely to come to the surface after rain. Some reptiles, particularly some of the mutingka (small skinks) live specifically on the sand dunes. Frogs lie buried on the moister side of the dunes, emerging after rain.

Nyaru – burnt or regenerated areas

Pila and tali become nyaru after they are burned, with similar animals in both habitats. Animals like the nyaru after a fire because there are many types of food plants here, such as kampurapa (desert raisin) and wiriny-wirinyapa (bush tomato), edible seed grasses and succulents. Animals such as tarkawara (spinifex hopping-mouse) prefer the nyaru for foraging while others such as tjanṯalka (military dragon) move away until the spinifex cover comes back.

Flora

The growth and reproduction of plant communities rely on irregular rainfall. Some plants are able to survive fire, some are dependent on it to reproduce. The flora of Uluru-Kata Tjuta National Park represents a large portion of plants found in central Australia. A number of these species are considered rare and are restricted to the Park or the immediate region.

Wildlife

The desert wildlife is adapted to the harsh conditions. The fauna is secretive and nocturnal. The Park protects a greater number of reptile species than any comparable area of Australia.

This century a number of medium size mammals have disappeared from the Park, all of which have cultural significance. These disappearances have been attributed to predators such as foxes and cats, competitors such as rabbits, and to ecological changes such as the suspension of traditional burning practices prior to the handback of the land to the Traditional Owners in 1985.

The National Park plans to reintroduce important Tjukurpa species that have disappeared from the Park such as wayuta (common brushtail possum), mala, (rufous hare wallaby) and waru (black-footed rock wallaby).

