Dr Bruce Veitch
30 June 1957 – 10 March 2005

Bruce Veitch passed away in Perth on 10 March 2005 after a short battle with motor neurone disease. Bruce was married to archaeologist Fiona Hook and had a young son Conall. Bruce was a co-director of the cultural heritage company Archae-Aus Pty Ltd with Fiona.

Bruce has made a major impact on the practice and ethics of archaeological work in Western Australia. From his pioneering work on the Mitchell Plateau for his doctorate, to his collaborative cultural heritage work with Fiona in the Pilbara and elsewhere, he was known for his energy, persistence and honesty. He mobilised and published consultancy work, collaborated closely with the traditional owners whose sites he was working on and worked strategically with major industry players – such as Hamersley/Rio and BHP – as well as colleagues in the Department of Indigenous Affairs and in the archaeological profession. Bruce was committed to mentoring graduates and was endlessly supportive and generous with his time, skills and knowledge. This obituary tracks some of Bruce’s more significant achievements through time.

Bruce completed his BA (Hons) at the University of New England in 1985, examining ethnohistorical sources and archaeological imprints of the pre-contact exploitation of bracken fern. In his later postgraduate life for his doctorate he carried out ethno-archaeological survey and excavation programs on the Mitchell Plateau of the very remote north-west Kimberley coast of Western Australia. His analysis of rockshelter deposits and mounded middens, in particular, generated discourses about the likely prime movers for economic and demographic change being embedded in either social process or changing environmental landscapes. The work of Dr Harry Lourandos was pivotal in these analyses and debates. Part of his PhD research specifically focussed on a technological analysis of flaked stone from three rockshelters from the Mitchell Plateau (Ngurini, Wundalal and Bangorono). As stated by Bruce, the object of the exercise was to: (a) identify the time when points were first produced; (b) identify and quantify the nature of change associated with the appearance of points both on the Mitchell Plateau and in northern Australia; and, (c) identify changes in lithic procurement strategies, and by inference, changes in relative levels of logistic and residential mobility from the time points appeared both on the Mitchell Plateau and in northern Australia. The other major contribution of his thesis involved the analysis of three large shell mounds on the Mitchell Plateau (Goala, Wundadjingangnari and Idayu). Here Bruce challenged prevailing models relating Anadara shell mound formation in northern Australia to environmental change, instead linking the appearance of Anadara and Tapes to regional population growth, reduced mobility, a broadening of the resource base and wider structural changes in Aboriginal territorial arrangements. Bruce was awarded his PhD from UWA in 2000.

Most of Bruce’s cultural heritage and collaborative research work over the last decade was in the Pilbara region – where mitigation projects included recovering and dating stone arrangements, linear middens and rockshelter habitation sites (see major publications below).

Bruce was always field-active (a cruel irony given his disabling condition during the last 6 months of his life). In 1982 he participated in excavations with Professor Graham Connah at Bagots Hill historic site, NSW, and with Professor Mike Morwood at the Rocky Scrub Creek site, in south-east Queensland. In 1984 he participated in surveys with Dr Luke Godwin within the Apsley Gorge of north-west NSW and then with Dr Dan Gillespie and Ms Hillary Sullivan on the rock art assemblages of Kakadu National Park. During the next year his field efforts accelerated and Bruce spent a month with Dr Moya Smith engaged in anthropological study of Bardi fishing technology at Cape Levique, WA, and with myself (Peter Veth) for three months carrying out the first field season of archaeological survey and excavation in the Great and Little Sandy Deserts of Western Australia.

By 1987 Bruce was establishing the base for his doctoral research on the Mitchell Plateau, negotiating with Wunambal people at Mowanjum (near Derby) and Kalumburu. Enrolled in a doctorate at UWA Bruce

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What is patently clear from this précis is that Bruce was engaged in an extraordinarily broad range of archaeological endeavours across Australia – all of which were carried out closely with custodial and traditional owner support and participation and which were supervised and written up to a satisfactory conclusion. In addition to these productions, and his peer-reviewed papers and chapters (some of which are listed below) Bruce presented some 15 papers on all aspects of his research and consultancy activities at both domestic and international conferences.

Bruce’s dedication to his friends and the profession will make him sorely missed. The loss to his family is immeasurable. As the numerous mourners at his funeral filed past Bruce’s coffin, his iconic and severely battered Akubra placed jauntily at one end, Votives – in the form of Western Australian (South-West, Pilbara and Kimberley) shellfish – were symbolically offered, in recognition of a truly admirable person and career.

Peter Veth and Sean Ulm

Major Publications


