

Rangers preserve history



Rangers at work helping to preserve the ancient history of Laura's rock art.

By SUSAN MARSH

THE Quinkan Reserves are internationally recognised as one of the 10 most significant rock art sites in the world. It is one of the oldest continuously occupied areas in Australia, with ground stone axes excavated near the Laura Township dated at 31,900 years before present (BP).

The area also contains the earliest paintings in the country dated to over 24,000 years making them the second oldest in the world. A single painting at Cosquer Cave near Marseille in France is reputedly 2,000 years older, although the dating of this painting remains contentious among the archaeological community.

The use of pigments in rock art developed simultaneously in pre-glacial Europe and Australasia. As one of the earliest inhabited areas of Australia, the Laura area may contain some answers to the many questions regarding the expansion of Homo sapiens across the globe.

However, anyone wishing to view these ancient paintings at Laura is destined for disappointment. The visible paintings only date to 6,000 years BP although some engravings are older.

Exfoliation of the sandstone surface, superimposition of later paintings and the accumulation of dust and salts on the rock face have obscured earlier works. This salt accumulation occurs only in Northern Australia as a result

of the wet/dry cycles, deposits up to 4mm thick have been found at some sites. The date of 24,000 years was obtained from an excavated fragment of painting.

It is this continual loss of artwork which is at the heart of the Laura Ranger's Rock Art Conservation project. Thanks to funding from DERM's Cape York Land and Sea project, the rangers are recording the artwork to be entered into the Aboriginal and Torres Straight Cultural Heritage data base for future generations.

Currently only a fraction of the galleries in the region have been listed on this data base. This data base can only be accessed on the authority of the Traditional Owners. Information held in this data base can also help protect cultural sites as Landholders are required by law to contact the data base (ph 3239 3648) to ensure there are no cultural sites in the vicinity before undertaking high impact improvements. As the exact location of sites is not revealed the landholder must work with the Traditional Owners to identify the site(s) and develop a mutual agreement.

The rangers are also protecting some cultural sites from deterioration by undertaking conservation measures such as trimming vegetation, erecting animal exclusion fencing and putting up guard rails. DERM and South Cape York Catchments continue to support the Laura Rangers to ensure that they can keep undertaking this valuable work.