



'MakMak': *The White-breasted sea-eagle.*

Good Country



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'My strength, the strength of the land. You can feel it in yourself, you belong there. It's your country, your dust, your place. You remember the old people. The white eagles always greet me. It's home. Safety and security. You see the birds, you see the country, and your senses come back to you. You know what to do and where to go.'

MakMak people

THE FLOODPLAINS

Fly to Darwin in the Northern Territory of Australia, and rent a four-wheel drive vehicle. Drive south-west to Litchfield National Park, going through the little bush town of Batchelor. As you near the park you leave the flat scrub of the Darwin hinterland and begin to climb the Tabletop Range. There comes a moment when you cross the watershed and catch a glimpse of the enormous western sky. Traces of smoke will tell you that there is land over there, and that the country is being 'fired'. The dense manner in which the light hangs in the air on the far horizon will tell you that the sea is there beyond. You feel transfixed, and yet nothing in these densities and opacities of light, air, water and fire tells you of the violence and love that are connected to this place.

You are seeing the sky that rests over 'the Wagait', one of the most contested areas in Australia. Once this was Indigenous people's land, in all the complexity of that land tenure system. Since late in the nineteenth century, invasion by European and Chinese settlers, and by feral plants and animals, has resulted in a multiplicity of land-use objectives. These include pastoralism, mining, tourism, conservation and reclamation, along with Indigenous subsistence and land care. With conquest, parts of the area were reserved for Aboriginal people; and when the Australian nation decided to move beyond its colonial regime by granting unconditional citizenship and land rights to Aboriginal people, the former reserve became the site of an intensely bitter dispute amongst Aboriginal people.

The white-breasted sea-eagle clan, known as the MakMak people in their own language, has lived here 'since time immemorial', as they state. This is their country — their life, law and land. They were a party to the land rights dispute, and are now secure in their tenure of a portion of their traditional homelands.

We invite you to travel with us, and share in some of the love and care that keeps this country alive.



The evening sky above the Wagait.