

Echo Camp Backtrack and Extreme 4WD

Another early day - sunrise and I were becoming familiar, friendly even. The lights refused to come on when there was the merest hint of sunlight - secretly I think they operated on moonlight interference as well!

Boots on, jeans on, thermals, shirt, jacket..... Breakfast eaten, coffee drunk....
We were out of there!

Shannon, Luther, Jane and I were collecting water specimens from a range of water holes across the Arakoola Sanctuary and some just off there. It was a broad spectrum of environments but all were punctuated by the current or previous existence of water. In such an arid land, this water encouraged an explosion of flora and fauna in their general region. Some species were fairly specific but others were more widespread.

Each sample would be tested later to investigate the various characteristics and contrasted to the preceding ones ... building up a living and non living profile of each source. There were to be samples taken from five sites - each varying in the degree of accessibility.

Sample One came from the Arakoola Waterhole, a site renowned for the secret life of the yellow legged rock wallaby!!!! And we saw one - a shy creature notable for the golden short front legs, the black facial mask and the long banded tail. The previous wildlife, in the form of kangaroos had been waiting for photo opportunities and catered willingly to the tourist lens. This little animal, when aware of its exposure, leapt away, frightened by the enthusiastic shutter sounds.

We drove onwards.... And slightly upwards!!!!

Gate..... only way through was with a key!

We returned to base..... The others had yet to leave - consulting and negotiating about the whys and wherefores and whatever!!!! We got our key but it was a one way track for reasons that would become obvious to we innocent travellers.

Our path would leave us wiser but enthused for greater challenge; bored by the singular monotony of everyday travel!

This unbounded enthusiasm for the gathering of water samples could be viewed by cynics as complete ignorance - they would probably be right!

The initial path led us up, immediately up over a gravelly road slightly rumped by recent rains. It was steep but we, although having been warned by the intrepid driver, Shannon, remained full of cheer(and ignorance). We reached the top and immediately went down - yes- right down so I was gazing at the bottom of the hill.... Okay... it was steep. The rutted hill base prophesised the next few kilometres.

The gullies were surrounded by enormous edifices - rising steeply from the gully floors, littered by eons of eroded rock and touched with green clumps of stunted trees. In contrast, the gully floor was covered with tall eucalypts, white ghosts grappling for the underground water which would sustain their life. In some parts, the bark patterns of these old giants conjured the images often seen in Australian landscapes.

Moving right along..... We reached Echo Camp waterhole - so named because of the echoes that can be heard when calling towards the rock wall that backs the waterhole.... Grey wallabies hopped silently through the rocks deterred from their usual drinking source. We came, we gathered, we left.....

And the fun began!

Up, down, washouts, sliding rocks....

Bam!

Hung up on a rock that didn't want to move from its river base. The team moved into action and through sheer brute strength threw the rock out of the path of the 4WD... onwards we went.....

Should we go to Baranana? We really were almost there but...

We headed on the downhill side towards the next sampling site - STOP!

Is this safe? What's the road like? Ah... this left things to the last minute! There was a sheer drop over the top of that seemingly little rock! In situations like this, with no back up vehicle, it would have been tempting fate to continue and it would have been questionable as to whether we would be able to get back.

Reverse..... Easier said than done for most but with the heroic streak embedded within our fearless driver and an era of experience under her belt, Shannon was on fire and she roared into life, threw the gears into reverse and the vehicle reluctantly backed away from the rock, up the hill and back to safety! What a hero!

From this stage onwards, we had no choice but to move forwards as, all along this road there was no room for manoeuvring. We rode out of the valley, up to the crest where we could gaze across the rock covered plains of this land... what views! Even our final excitement, the last downhill run, fraught with fear, was nothing compared to our previous run!

We did not collect a sample from that one!

Back to base, along the tiresome tedious path of the tourist... we had travelled this road before.

Key returned and off to the final sampling grounds behind the resort... two beautiful places. Both these sites were along dry river beds... the usual picturesque gum trees and the high rock walls were inimical of the water hole.....

By this time it was late afternoon and we still needed to get to Marree which was over 200km away... and so we went. We left behind Arkaroola - a most unique and hauntingly beautiful place. The story of this land contextualised the present, carved by antiquity, painted by nature and constantly evolving..... A most inspirational experience!

Liz Ryan (Shannon Rupert's Team)