



## THE NATIONALLY PROTECTED ARNHEM PLATEAU SANDSTONE SHRUBLAND COMPLEX

The Arnhem Plateau Sandstone Shrubland Complex or Arnhem Shrubland Complex is an ecological community of national conservation significance comprised mostly of native shrubs, grasses and animals living in rock country. It is a vital habitat to a big number of plants and animals in Australia's Top End and is now protected under federal environment law, the *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999* (EPBC Act).

It is listed under the EPBC Act as an endangered ecological community because:

- hot fires are burning big areas of the plateau country too often
- weeds such as gamba grass (*Andropogon gayanus*) and mission grass (*Cenchrus polystachion*), and feral animals such as cats and cane toads, which aren't part of the ecological community, are also making the country unhealthy.



Sandstone Country. (Helena Mills)

Not as many Indigenous people live on the plateau to look after the country these days, so the old ways of burning do not happen as much. Big, hot fires burning late in the hot dry season have made the land unhealthy. If these hot fires happen over too much country, and too often, some plants don't have time to regrow and make seed. Hot fires that burn too often kill the parent plants and the seed. Some animals have nowhere to go to escape hot fires (such as Alyurr<sup>1</sup> or Leichhardt's grasshopper) and others don't have food after big, hot fires. Animals from unburnt areas further away don't have time to move in before the next big fire happens.

The old ways used by Indigenous people living on country, were to mainly start small cooler fires in different parts of the land during the early dry season. This created lots of small patches of burnt and unburnt land. The old ways cleaned and rested different parts of the land so that it had time to regrow before the next big fire at least five years later. These patches helped stop big, hot fires from spreading. With the old ways, many animals could live and move through the land easier and the native plants in the Arnhem Shrubland Complex would regrow and stay healthy. These traditional ways of managing the land helped to retain the areas of the ecological

1 Jaowyn and Gundjeibmi language for children of the lightning man Namarragon.