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Marking four decades of World Heritage – The view from Australia

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Abstract

The celebration of the milestone of the fortieth year since the adoption by UNESCO of the World Heritage Convention provided a global stimulus for reflection that included activities in Australia. Four decades of experience of implementing the idealistic and international notions that underpin the Convention had demonstrated the distinctiveness of the potential contributions from Australia, New Zealand and the Pacific. With that in mind, the starting premise of this volume of Historic Environment has been to provide a snapshot of the experiences of World Heritage in Australia – essentially the view from ‘here’, and a specifically oriented view based on the experiences and priorities of cultural heritage practice.

The Convention at 40 in Australia

At the international level, ICOMOS is formally involved in the World Heritage system as one of the three Advisory Bodies that are responsible for providing independent technical expertise in cultural and/or natural heritage. In practice, this work occurs in many settings and processes – including conservation advice across a range of specialist fields, evaluation of nominations, responses to State of Conservation reports, various forms of missions that visit heritage properties, capacity building and policy development. In addition to their work at local and national levels, members of Australia ICOMOS, ICOMOS New Zealand and ICOMOS Pasifika have played and continue to play an active and important role in the World Heritage mandate of ICOMOS. Voices and perspectives from our part of the world contribute regularly to the work of ICOMOS and UNESCO on a global basis.

The 40th anniversary of the World Heritage Convention was marked with a substantial and global year-long program of activities in 2012. In Australia, both Australia ICOMOS and the Australian Committee for IUCN held national symposia in 2012 (Figgis et al 2012; Queale this volume), and Australia ICOMOS also organised state-based forums to share multiple perspectives on the state of play in Australia and the world (Australia ICOMOS 2012). The Australia ICOMOS National Symposium on the World Heritage Convention was held on the very day that the Convention’s 40th birthday occurred – 16 November 2012.

The conversations were different in each place, a very rich survey of how people around Australia are engaging with the realities and possibilities of World Heritage. These exchanges included the ways in which Australian practice has contributed to improvements in global practice, interests and concerns about the implications of World Heritage recognition, and the work of Australian practitioners in the Asia-Pacific region.
The potential for new World Heritage nominations from Australia was of interest to many participants – with diverse proposals such as the rock art and cultural landscape of the Burrup Peninsula in north-western Australia, the rural agricultural and viticultural landscapes of the Barossa Valley and Mount Lofty Ranges (Johnston this volume), the Victorian Goldfields (Bannear this volume), the Adelaide Parklands, the Cornish mining heritage of Burra, the Australian Alps, the cultural landscapes of Cape York Peninsula and Budj Bim in the Country of the Gunditjmara people in south-west Victoria (Rose this volume). In addition, the symposium organised by the Australian Committee for IUCN (ACIUCN) in August 2012, discussed more than a dozen potential new natural World Heritage nominations, including the technically and politically problematic case of Antarctica (Figgis et al 2012).

While these proposals range from first thoughts to well researched and developed cases, they demonstrate the continuing appeal of World Heritage. In most cases, they also rest on impressive coalitions of interests established at the local level, including proposals initiated by Indigenous Traditional Owners, communities and local government. They exhibit a high degree of activism and learning about how the World Heritage system works, and creativity about the potential relationship between World Heritage recognition and social and economic well-being. However, none of these proposals is currently included in the Australian Government’s Tentative List, the now-compulsory first step in formally presenting a nomination to the World Heritage List (UNESCO 2013, par. 62-76). Australia is notable for its caution in developing its Tentative List, and despite public commitments and work on nominations by the previous Labor Government and the current Coalition Government, the Australian Tentative List remains extremely modest, with only two extensions to natural World Heritage properties included (for the existing properties of Fraser Island the Gondwana Rainforests of Australia) (UNESCO 2014).

Earlier in Australia’s World Heritage history, Australia ICOMOS and the Australian Committee for IUCN collaborated with governments to establish the Tentative List. Now there is much that these Australian national committees of the Advisory Bodies could again do to assist the Australian Government to build a credible and inspiring Tentative List based on themes of universal significance and analyses of gaps in the World Heritage List (see the ‘Cairns Communiqué’ in Figgis et al 2012).

Many of the Australian discussions in 2012 also voiced concerns and made proposals about Australia’s existing World Heritage properties. In some cases, these focused on the possibilities of re-nomination of some natural properties as ‘mixed’, or re-nomination of some ‘mixed’ properties as cultural landscapes to allow a stronger and more culturally compatible characterisation of Indigenous cultural values, and a visibility and proper ‘seat at the table’ for Traditional Owners. It is increasingly recognised that World Heritage processes must be based on the free, prior and informed consent of Traditional Owners having regard to both Indigenous cultural heritage values and to continuing traditional ecological knowledge and practices within Indigenous communities. These conversations inevitably strayed into issues concerning the duality or separate conceptualisation of nature and culture within the World Heritage system, and the difficulty this can create when working with the beliefs and traditions of Indigenous peoples in Australia (see Lilley 2013; Grant 2012; Talbot 2012; Buckley & Badman 2014).

The discussions also highlighted concerns about the management and protection of World Heritage properties (as will be discussed further below), the potential impacts of new developments in and near World Heritage sites and areas, and the declining resources available for an ever more complex set of responsibilities. The 40th anniversary of the Convention therefore occurred at a time when there are new opportunities and substantial and complex challenges, especially for the sustainable management of World Heritage properties.

The Regional View

The timing of the 40th anniversary was important from a regional perspective as the report for ‘Asia and the Pacific’ in the World Heritage Periodic Reporting program was submitted to the World Heritage Committee at its thirty-sixth session in St Petersburg in 2012 (UNESCO 2012a). This was the culmination of three years of research, meetings and dedicated attention
by the World Heritage Centre, States Parties (41) and World Heritage properties (198) across the region. The process included a number of advisors, focal points and facilitators working with site managers and government officials. Australian members represented ICOMOS at several sub-regional Periodic Reporting meetings as well as the (separate) Asian and Pacific meetings. Both final meetings resulted in action plans that can be used to establish priorities and monitor progress.

Having been directly involved with the process at both the regional and national levels, we would like to highlight two outcomes of the Periodic Reporting exercise. The first is the formal, ‘user-oriented’ report (UNESCO 2012b); and the second is the extraordinary enthusiasm engendered in the meeting environment for an ongoing dialogue between managers of World Heritage properties throughout the region, and especially at the sub-regional level. The shared reality of the common issues, challenges and opportunities created a strong desire for regional consultation and exchange, including the potential for local World Heritage activities to build capacity for heritage conservation at the national-levels. Perhaps the most disappointing outcome from our perspective, is that the lack of resources for all parts of the system – the UNESCO World Heritage Centre, the Advisory Bodies, many of the States Parties, and the World Heritage site-managers – has meant that this desire for ongoing communication and exchange has been difficult to activate.

The Periodic Reporting process is one of the key monitoring mechanisms provided in the Operational Guidelines (UNESCO 2013, par. 199-210) and its capacity to focus attention on management rather than listing issues makes it a potentially powerful tool in promoting the realities of World Heritage listing after the fanfare of a successful nomination has subsided. The need for greater attention to post-listing management responsibilities is a common theme in commentaries about the current challenges.

At the national level in Australia, the Periodic Reporting process became a matter of concerted attention for the Australian government, State and Territory heritage organisations and each of our World Heritage properties. As with the first cycle of Periodic Reporting for the Asia and Pacific in 2003, the (then) Australian Government Department of Sustainability, Environment, Water, Population and Communities consulted with key stakeholders, including Australia ICOMOS and the Australian Committee for IUCN, allowing a constructive and welcome exchange.

There were many substantial issues in this exchange that could be the basis of continuing discussions ‘between reports’. For example, there were some gaps between the Australian Government’s assessment of its achievements and the challenges expressed by Australia ICOMOS (and others); and the summary format of the Periodic Report sometimes masked interesting and diverse outcomes for specific World Heritage properties. The matters of contention were long-standing and continuing – such as the provision of much-needed resources for the protection and conservation of World Heritage, community involvement mechanisms and concerns about the sparsely populated Tentative List – in fact a similar list of issues to those vigorously discussed during the symposia organised by Australia ICOMOS and the Australian Committee for IUCN in 2012.

Regrettably the flurry of activity, introspection and debate stimulated by the Periodic Reporting process has resulted in little further engagement with the issues identified at the national level and as mentioned above the hoped for regional dialogue has not proceeded in any coordinated or meaningful way. This is especially of concern for Asia, the fastest growing region in terms of World Heritage activity. It is difficult to celebrate the achievements of the Periodic Reporting process if it is not accompanied by an active program of response, and at worst it can appear as a six-yearly scoring process that engenders little benefit between cycles. One of the lessons already well understood is that Australia is better resourced than many of its regional neighbours, leaving us with an enhanced capacity for lobbying for improvements at the domestic level, and for providing much needed assistance across the region. What can Australia ICOMOS do to provoke a higher degree of engagement and cooperation? How can members work constructively with the Australian Government to activate some of the elements of the Action Plans for Asia and the Pacific?
For Australian practitioners these processes should encourage an outward-looking orientation and consideration of sustainability and heritage issues in our region. It is often said that the true spirit of the Convention is its potential to stimulate inter-cultural dialogue and international cooperation to support conservation. If this is so, what can we do to work with others in our vast and diverse region? In the Pacific, it is worth noting the contributions of the Australian and New Zealand Governments to support capacity building over the past 10 years, and the significant progress that has been achieved by governments and colleagues in the Pacific Islands countries and territories that led to the establishment of the Pacific Heritage Hub in 2012. Australia ICOMOS is currently establishing a small cooperative program with ICOMOS Pasifika to develop a two-way exchange of skills and knowledge, but what more can we do to support the Pacific Heritage Hub? And what more can we do to work with our Asian colleagues to enhance capacity and outcomes in heritage protection?

**Looking Ahead?**

It is often mentioned that Australia and New Zealand have played important parts in the World Heritage story so far. As mentioned already, voices and minds from our region have helped to achieve some of the transforming innovations. Australia’s capacity to apply values-based approaches to management added important rigour to the evolution of the Operational Guidelines and to the ideas of monitoring conservation outcomes. Aspects of the Global Strategy, and the recognition of associative cultural landscapes were also strongly influenced by Australian and New Zealand representatives, and the joint management arrangements with Indigenous Traditional Owners at Kakadu and Uluru Kata-Tjuta National Parks are important examples that have attracted global attention (Titchen 2012; Cameron & Rössler 2013).

Australia therefore has a justifiably proud record in World Heritage, based on these achievements, excellent systems for management, monitoring and impact assessment, strong and early laws for Australia’s World Heritage obligations, and standards such as the Burra Charter (Titchen 2012). There is good reason to celebrate this valuable contribution, but we need to be careful not to rest too heavily on past achievements. There is too much to do, and our proud record will only be sustained by continuing to earn it.

In its most recent term on the World Heritage Committee, Australia launched the reflection on the future of the Convention, and argued strongly for processes that would strengthen the integrity of the Convention and its credibility (DSEWPAC 2011). But these years have been followed by some confusing and controversial proposals and decisions in 2013-2014 by Australian Governments – such as the proposed changes to increase and then reduce the boundary of the Tasmanian Wilderness World Heritage Area, high-rise development near Parramatta Park (an element in the Australian Convict Sites) and a range of complex issues concerning the use and protection of the Great Barrier Reef. These are complex matters that will continue to fuel debate in Australia into the future – raising issues of conservation and natural resources management, of the contexts of conservation of Indigenous cultural heritage, about the limits of acceptable change in the vicinity of heritage places, and about the use and protection of natural and cultural heritage. These issues are very common in the world, so the experiences of how they are resolved here matter internationally. To our knowledge, these cases have not involved an effective dialogue with Australia ICOMOS, the Australian Committee for IUCN, Traditional Owners or other associated communities and users of these well-loved places, land- and sea-scapes. If our World Heritage capacity rests on our ‘every-day’ heritage management capacity, how well placed are we to meet our World Heritage commitments into the future?

Sustainable long-term conservation of World Heritage properties depends on the capacity of national and local institutions, and the engaged support of civil society. In that frame, we note the particular heritage cross-roads at which we find ourselves in Australia. This is illustrated by the findings of the Australian State of the Environment Report in 2011, which concluded with the following ‘headline’, emphasising both the achievements and the challenges ahead:
Our extraordinary and diverse natural and cultural heritage is currently in good condition, but is threatened by natural and human processes, and a lack of public sector resourcing. (Australian State of the Environment Committee 2011: 5)

The State of the Environment Report especially points to the lack of adequate documentation and protection for Indigenous cultural heritage, and to disconnects between planning and heritage systems. In addition to this cyclical national ‘snapshot’, the lack of adequate resourcing of important bodies such as AWHIN (Australian World Heritage Indigenous Network) and AWHAC (Australian World Heritage Advisory Committee) is also a worrying symptom, and there is a general trend of contraction of heritage agencies in most Australian States and Territories.

Maintaining high standards will require a reconsideration of the position of heritage within national and local public discourses as a matter of urgency. It is hoped that the recently re-started process to develop a National Heritage Strategy will provide some much-needed new leadership, direction, consensus and momentum for our own future (Department of the Environment 2014). While the outcomes in terms of the final Strategy are as yet unknown, the engagement demonstrated by the submissions has been encouraging. Both Australia ICOMOS and AWHAC have made contributions in response to draft documentation and in formal stakeholder forums, the priorities reflecting those already expressed in the 2011 State of the Environment Report, responses to the Periodic Reporting questionnaires and in other communications to various levels of Australian governments. They are also well articulated in the 2012 ‘Cairns Communiqué’, which included input from Australia ICOMOS (see MacLean, this volume).

For World Heritage, the submissions to the national heritage strategy process reiterate a standing catalogue of needs and aspirations, including resourcing, local capacity building and engagement, management plans, education, research and support for the efforts of private owners, Traditional Owners and communities. The primary goals reflect the need for World Heritage management to meet Australia’s obligations under the World Heritage Convention, and the desire to ensure that Australia remains committed to giving our World Heritage properties a ‘function in the life of the community’ (UNESCO 1972, Article 5). This requires viable services for the protection, conservation and presentation of natural and cultural heritage, scientific and technical studies, and appropriate legal, scientific, technical and financial measures in support of heritage. The request to foster the establishment of centres of excellence sets a very high and long-term bar for the continuing work across 19 Australian World Heritage properties, located across a vast expanse of locations, histories, cultures and environments.

In line with the discussion above regarding Periodic Reporting, the Strategy process can also encourage the Australian Government, in collaboration with World Heritage property managers, to actively build on and pursue opportunities to grow international capacity for World Heritage management through training, staff exchange, twinning and other bilateral and multi-lateral arrangements that meet the mutual needs of the partners.

This volume of Historic Environment captures some of the dimensions of Australia’s participation in the implementation of the World Heritage Convention – including the contributions of Australian practitioners, communities and officials in the international arena. Hopefully it provides many things – snapshots of this moment in time, some celebrations, some cautionary tales and some new work for the thriving and diverse heritage community in our part of the world. Most importantly, we hope it inspires new debate.

References


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