

Australia's World Heritage – Keeping the Outstanding Exceptional

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I want to begin by acknowledging the Traditional Owners of the land that we're meeting on today and their elders past and present. I thank you very much for that very warm and informative Welcome to Country.

Welcome to Country provides a good frame to guide all discussions about heritage. Heritage is of course about the story of place. In Australia, we have the great privilege of the story of place, being something where we have a living history, and an expertise and depth of understanding through Traditional Owner groups being the longest continuing culture in the world that simply cannot be matched in other parts of the world.

We are of course in the fortieth anniversary of World Heritage. We also happen to be meeting on International World Indigenous Peoples Day. The theme of Indigenous voices being heard properly and honestly has been particularly important.

I'd like to begin with a very personal summary of how I engage with World Heritage. It provides a pathway for me to provide some explanation as to where I think we're up to, what I think we need to do better, and what I believe are the next steps.

In 1972, World Heritage was established through an interesting issue involving world funding for the relocation of some ancient Abu Simbel temples in Egypt threatened by the construction of the Aswan Dam. They didn't stop the dam, but the international community rallied to fund the moving of the temples. That was the beginning of World Heritage. In 1972 at the same time we had both environmental protection and Indigenous rights being looked at in a very real and new way with the advent of the Whitlam Government.

In 1972, at about this time forty years ago, I was two years old, and had no idea what was happening on the radio. In that time though, if I look back and reflect on the main stories I remember hearing on the radio. I remember hearing stories about the threat of drilling on the Great Barrier Reef and later as I got into high school, of the threat of the damming of the Franklin



The spectacular Roaring Meg Falls in Daintree National Park known by the Eastern Kuku Yalanji People as 'Kija', is an area that has very high Aboriginal cultural significance. Photo © K. Trapnell, Wet Tropics Images

River. Then I remember hearing stories of the risk of the Daintree Rainforest becoming a housing development and of Kakadu National Park becoming a uranium mine.

Effectively the major environmental stories of Australia have been stories where World Heritage has been at the core. With each of those, the Franklin and the - the Franklin certainly is the other way around. The listing happened first before there was a guarantee that the listing would be used to prevent the dam. But none the less, the stories of environmental protection and World Heritage have gone hand in hand for the last forty years in Australia.

Therein I think lies a significant challenge. We have a situation in Australia with World Heritage that is different from much of the rest of the world. In much of the rest of the world environmental powers lie with their national governments and World Heritage is seen simply as an extra layer of international recognition and telling of the story. In Australia of course, ever since those Whitlam years, it has also been a way of activating the Commonwealth through the External Affairs Power in our constitution.

Cape York will only become World Heritage with the agreement of its Traditional owners. Photo © Kerry Trapnell

The World Heritage Convention has involved number of very significant environmental decisions, transferring state control to federal authority, and ultimately to the desk of the person, who holds the office of the Minister of the Environment - which at the moment, with respect, is me.

My first political engagement was at the age of fourteen or fifteen, when I started writing letters to politicians. I told them I wanted to save the Daintree Rainforest especially the magnificent area where rainforest and reef met side by side. I had posters of the area all around my bedroom walls. I was passionate about it, it was the reason I ultimately made the decision to join the Labor Party when I was sixteen.

The Daintree World Heritage decision though, as I understood it, was very much about simply wanting to prevent a state government from going down a particular path. Now we have reached the fortieth anniversary, I think it is important for us to take stock, and make sure we are never treating World Heritage simply as a constitutional device. We need to make sure that with the incredibly significant shift in responsibility that happens when something is listed for World



Heritage, that we never allow that to be the whole story. And the story is one that is so important.

Heritage itself, whether built or natural heritage, is about telling the story. There is a lot of discussion that you'll hear at the moment, where people will lament the loss of books and how they like being able to actually hold a book. The move to iPads or Kindles, they say, means that they feel that they are missing part of the history.

What we need to remember here, is history existed long before the invention of the printing press- that while books have become a key tool for providing information, history lives in place. Text is a way of informing us about that history, but history actually lives in place.

One of my favourite poems is one by TS Eliot. A poem that is part of his *Four Quartets*, published together with *Murder in the Cathedral*. And the first of those is *Burnt Norton*. There's a line in that poem *Burnt Norton* that other echoes inhabit the garden. And I think that expression about, 'echoes inhabit the garden', is the best summary I've ever found of what heritage is about. In the garden, in the place, in the building, the echoes of the site, the history of the site, the stories of the ancestors of the site, had a home there.

That story can be transferred to a book, in a whole range of ways. But it will never live in a book in the way it lives in a place. In being able to tell that story, World Heritage places give us an opportunity to do it, for built heritage, and for natural heritage.

Only a few weeks ago, I had the privilege of being at the Royal Exhibition Centre, and there, if you're looking for a place in Melbourne where 'the echoes inhabit the garden', you can close your eyes and almost hear it: almost hear the voices of the people who would have been there during the Industrial Revolution, seeing the big new pieces of machinery that were coming in, able to do things that never could have been done in the past.

You could almost close your eyes, and hear the calls of the opening of the first national parliament of Australia as the mace is brought in. And you can close your eyes and hear the roars of the boxing matches there - history survives in that place.

So too, for me, when I first came to the Daintree, I was taken to coffee shops until eventually I said, look I just want to go somewhere really quiet, somewhere really quiet and hidden.

And I took my kids to Cape Tribulation, and could remember the images that had been on my bedroom wall, and could hear the voices then of people enjoying site, that was going to be preserved forever. I could hear the voices. Hear the voices of the ancestors,

the people who called this land home, right back to the first sunrise.

Then we come to the issue of management. With the example of the UNESCO Great Barrier Reef Report, I think, people will look at it and say well it does endorse that we are engaging best practice management.

You'll find a whole lot of language in there that's about endorsement. You'll find a whole lot of language in there that is about potential trends into the future, but ultimately - ultimately it is a reminder that World Heritage is not simply a constitutional device. Ultimately, the report says to us, with World Heritage comes a great level of ongoing responsibility.

It is not simply enough to have the best reef system in the world. There is also an obligation, just as ancestors show in looking after the country for future generations, but with World Heritage, we all take on looking after areas for future generations.

The strategic assessment that we're engaging in for the Reef, is a way of allowing the legal system within Australia to come to terms with the environmental and cultural responsibilities that we take on with World Heritage.

One of the problems has been that in both public debate and environmental decisions, we have tended to judge the value of how well we're looking after the environment by waiting for each project to come along, waiting to see how big the demonstrations were against it, and then seeing whether after all the investments happen at the final hurdle, do we allow it or do we knock it back?

If we do that, and we allow that to be the continued path, we'll have two problems; one, we will never get to value the story of the heritage of the areas that we put into World Heritage without massive conflict. So many Australians know the story of the Franklin River. How many know the story of Willandra Lakes? And, yet Willandra Lakes have been on the World Heritage list for so much longer.

We can't allow the story to be only told if there is enough conflicts surrounding it. We have to make sure that the management and the care for an area is something that we respect. In being able to respect management and care for an area, we therefore have to be able to make sure the values of an area truly reflect the values that are listed, must truly reflect the values that are there.

I've had one of the more moving moments of my life, which I quite proudly can't really talk about it, at an end ceremony at Uluru, when Uluru was listed for its natural and cultural values.

Some of the cultural values, by definition can't be spoken about. Yet there is an obligation for them to be protected, and there's work that's going on which will be some of the most significant work I think I'm ever involved with in my life, that there's about 12 people I wouldn't be able to talk to about, but this work is important and it must occur. We undermine the heritage listings at their core if we only look to the natural values without respecting cultural values, and respecting cultural values within the rules that are ascribed to those cultural values, which often will be that they can't be spoken about.

For my own part, there's a story that is quite a story of personal identity and political identity in the Wet Tropics listing, and it means a lot to be making this speech, only a few hundred metres from the boundary of that Wet Tropics World Heritage listing. It's also the case for the National Heritage part of that we see Indigenous values, Indigenous cultural values have not be formally listed yet.

I also want to make sure that if we look at what are the next stages of World Heritage listings, what's the pathway that we need to go to next, that there are some principles from which I will not depart, and principles from which I hope no future ministers will depart: whether it be natural heritage or whether it be cultural heritage, as Australians we should now be in a situation where listings only occur with the consent of the Traditional Owners.

I believe when we fall short of it, we fall short of respecting the heritage we are pretending to protect. With Cape York, the process has been slower than many people would like, including myself. Anyone who was involved in the environmental movement at the time that I've described, saw images back then of Shelburne Bay, and was convinced that they were looking at images of the snow, not of the tropics. Those images in Cape York are just part of one of the most magnificent parts of the world.

I'm very hopeful that in the coming month we will be going through a process towards receiving Indigenous consent and Traditional Owner consent. But be in no doubt of two things: one, I very much want to be able to be the Minister to put that listing forward; and two, if there is no consent I will not do it. I think these rules, these principles, are important levels of respect, but they are also important to make sure that we are not undermining heritage at the same time that we are listing it.

The other area where World Heritage work is making progress at the moment is with respect to Tasmania. At the moment we have had talks that have been going

now for some time, for over two years. I first dealt with these issues when I was the Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries Minister and I am working through them now as the Environment Minister. Over the course of the weekend that we are coming to, we will have a fairly good idea as to whether or not a forestry peace deal is in fact going to be possible in Tasmania. If it is, opportunities should follow for some fresh movement on the world heritage boundaries there. That will be a real test on our capacity to tell the story. Because, of course it is a peace deal if it comes off, not a story of conflict.

I do believe structurally if you want to find a weakness in how we tell the story of heritage at the moment in Australia, is that if there is not much conflict, we don't tend to tell the story at all. This is something which we must fix, because otherwise we keep falling back into it being a constitutional device. It's there to tell the story and it's there because history lives, and is vibrant and has its echoes in place. And therefore we must find better ways of telling that story.

I believe there has probably been no way more effective in improving the telling the story of heritage than the work that's been done by Indigenous Rangers on heritage sites. This is occurring sometimes on national heritage sites, sometimes world heritage sites, sometimes in places within the national reserve system that are not currently listed in anyway.

But in the short time that we have been in office, the number of Indigenous rangers has gone from 135 to what will be, once the program reaches its next stages in a few months, up to 730, that is 135 to 730 Indigenous rangers - people living on country, working on country, caring for country. Through this program we make sure that all aspects of the heritage are preserved and that all aspects of the story of ancestors and of current generations are able to continue to be told now and into the future.

Effectively one of the tests with heritage I think, and it is well framed by a good friend of mine from the NSW Parliament, who is the local state member from my seat, Linda Burney, who always says the political test for us all is 'what sort of ancestors do we want to be'.

Let's look at the recent listings of Ningaloo for world heritage where you get the opposite of what you generally find at a beach. Generally at the beach you have the situation where across the dunes it can be buzzing with wildlife and then you get to the water and it is sandy and lifeless. At Ningaloo you get the lack of life on the land and it all bursts to life the moment you get under water.



Jeffrey Lee, the sole survivor of the Djok people agreed that he did not want a uranium mine on his land, he ensured his tradition land Koongara beneath Nourlangie Rock was added to Kakadu World Heritage Area.
Photo © Commonwealth (Parks Australia)

With the final completions of the Kakadu listings, with the situation where you have Jeffrey Lee, the sole survivor of the Djok people that in agreeing that he did not want a uranium mine on his land, he wanted Koongara added to the World Heritage listing. The Northern Land Council is now going through the final processes which hopefully means it won't be too long before I can stand up in the parliament and move to repeal the legislation, that has never been proclaimed, but is still on the statute books that allows uranium mining to be proclaimed within those areas.

So whether it be the stories that are yet to be told with the world discovering the magnificence of the additional areas of Tasmania, or the true magnificence of those areas of Cape York, whether it be the National Heritage site (the biggest National Heritage listing ever) across 19 million ha of the west Kimberley, or whether it be the environmental protection announced recently where Australia is now the world leader on protection of the

oceans with the Coral Sea - the jewel in the crown of the entire project, whether they be environmental protections through other methods or whether it be through national heritage and world heritage, we are making sure that Australia is in the front line of having a story that needs to be told. And within that we must make sure that the special role of Traditional Owners, the irreplaceable role of Traditional Owners, is at the heart of that heritage being preserved and that story being told.

If we do that, then the challenges that we have found in the UNESCO report, the reminder and the warning bells that have been sounded that say World Heritage is not about the day you announce it, is not about the constitutional shift in power, it is about how you manage it, preserve it, care for it and being 'a good ancestor'. Then for generations for come, Australia will be a land of many heritage sights, of many stories, a magnificent garden filled with echoes.