

Celebrating the role of World Heritage in Australia's environmental and cultural history

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Robert Hughes in 'The Fatal Shore' reflects on Australia's convict heritage, a still powerful thread in our diverse Australian journey.

"The visitor today, wandering through what remains of the [Port Arthur] penitentiary with other tourists, can hardly grasp the isolation it once stood for. Perhaps that is easier deduced from Nature itself, from the barely penetrable labyrinth of space that England chose as its abode of crime; and to see that, one need only go to the black basalt cliffs that frame the Tasman Peninsula, crawl through the bushes to their unfenced rim and gaze down on the wide, wrinkled, glimmering sheet of our imprisoning sea."

We have now found, and are still finding, that this glimmering sea doesn't imprison us, but laps on the shores of a magnificent natural and rich cultural heritage, that abounds on this ancient continent.

The story of imprisonment of some peoples is not our current story. Australia's World Heritage places remind us that we are custodians of something special, of universal value. This is part of us and we are part of it. This is home.

World Heritage and the Australian environment movement

From the earliest days of Australia's environment movement, formal recognition and protection for our beautiful landscapes and unique natural heritage were at the core of advocacy efforts. At the first meeting of the newly formed Australian Conservation Foundation's Council in 1965, the Great Barrier Reef, the Mallee, rainforests and Central Australia were identified as the four areas most needing coordinated national attention and action.

Since the 1970s, World Heritage listing has featured as the rallying point for many struggles against development and degradation, and remains a powerful focus to this day.

The emergence of a strong and coordinated environment movement during the 60s and 70s, along with occasional windows of opportunity afforded by responsive politicians, have given Australia a rich, but incomplete, network of protection across land tenures and jurisdictions.

The 1970s was a decade of increased public awareness of conservation issue. This resulted in various responses, from local activism to protect wildlife and bushland, to direct political activity with the



The Gordon River Falls. The 1980s battle to save the wild Franklin Gordon River of the Tasmanian wilderness was the defining battle of Australia's World Heritage history. Photo: © Grant Dixon

establishment of the world's first green political party in Tasmania in 1972 (Broadbent, 1999, p.54).

Environmentalists concerned about a range of issues from the impacts of commercial whaling, uranium mining in Kakadu, dams in Tasmania to sand mining on Fraser Island became increasingly skilled at campaigning from grass roots action to national policy and advocacy.

In 1974, Australia was one of the first countries to join the World Heritage Convention and the Australian Conservation Foundation proposed World Heritage nominations for areas of great natural and cultural heritage value, beginning with the Great Barrier Reef and Fraser Island (Broadbent, 1999 p.124).

From this time, through the eighties and nineties, and to a slightly lesser extent into the new century, World Heritage became the central goal of many of the dramatic campaigns for natural areas in Australia that define the evolution of modern conservation. The roll call is extensive: the Great Barrier Reef; Fraser Island and the Great Sandy region which included the Cooloola sand dunes; Moreton and Stradbroke Island; the rainforests of NSW which included such iconic battles as the Border Ranges, Terania Creek, Nightcap Ranges and South east Queensland; Stages two and three of Kakadu including the battle against Coronation Hill (Hamilton, 1996); the Wet Tropical Rainforests of northern Queensland, including the much disputed Daintree Region; and the ultimate and defining conservation battle of the last century the campaign to stop the damming of the iconic wild Franklin River in the heart of a declared World Heritage Area (Buckman, 2008 and Green, 1984).

World Heritage listing assumed this central importance because environmentalists felt that once an area was listed it would make its protection permanent. It was in effect Australia making a commitment to the rest of the world to ensure the 'Outstanding Universal Value' of listed places would be conserved for current and future generations. This goal seemed to have been partly achieved when in 1983, as the culmination of the nationwide campaign to save the Franklin River, the High Court of Australia upheld the validity of the World Heritage Properties Conservation Act 1983 (Broadbent, 1999 p.214).

A contested concept

It is worth remembering as we contemplate 40 years of the Convention that almost every stage of achieving World Heritage listing was a profound struggle where the NGO movement had to stand up against the prevailing paradigm of land only being valued for its capacity to produce commodities - minerals, timber,

pastoral feed or crops. This utilitarian approach to land use combined with a strong aspect of the Australian political culture, which pitted state's rights against the fear of a strong central government (Toyne, 1994) to create an adversarial rather than collaborative approach to conservation initiatives. The World Heritage Committee often stood amazed as opposing contingents of Australians arrived for World Heritage meetings to support or oppose a listing. An extreme example was when the Queensland Government sent its Minister for the Environment to lobby against the Australian nomination of the Wet Tropics of Queensland World Heritage Area (Valentine and Hill, 2008). It is worth noting that the Queensland delegation could not be heard due to the UN protocol that only national governments can address the meeting.

World Heritage therefore has been a focus of competing interests. Before it was listed, some saw the Reef as an oil generator, others as a great protected part of nature (Wright, 1977). Some saw the wet tropical rainforests as a source of wood, others as biologically rich and ancient ecosystems (Valentine & Hill, 2008). Some saw Koongarra in Kakadu as a uranium mine, while the Traditional Owners held it sacred as living cultural heritage handed down through hundreds and thousands of generations (ACF, 2013). Some saw the Franklin River in Tasmania as a source of hydro-electricity, others as a great wild river (Brown, 1987).

The Franklin Dam campaign was indeed a battle royale, culminating in the famous blockade which, in the summer of 2002 – 3, brought thousands of people to the river in undoubtedly Australia's most dramatic and most televised activist campaign (Green, 1984).

It became a global issue, even coming to the attention of the author of this paper as a school student in Scotland, with news that the famous botanist David Bellamy had been imprisoned for trying to stop the dam. Civil disobedience became a pathway for a new form of activism to protect wildlife and special places, familiar to students of social history in campaigns to end slavery, racial discrimination and women's suffrage.

Hence these outstanding places, and the people who would exploit or protect them, have led to significant and vitriolic battles often lasting many years, and resulting in political and legal changes. We are still feeling the effects of these events. In Tasmania the bitter brawl over the forests continues to this day as those who would convert ancient forests to paper clash with those who see them as treasure houses of history, culture and biodiversity. The forestry industry has struggled to adapt to changing global markets, while conservationists advocate for living, intact forests to be properly valued and protected as an economic asset.

Issues of Today

The focus of conservation discussion in Australia has widened to include more systemic issues like sustainable development, restoration of degraded landscapes and waterways, expanding protection to the marine environment, and working with Traditional Owners to protect natural and cultural values.

However many organisations like ACF continue to support World Heritage and strongly support extensions and new nominations. They remain constantly alert to the integrity of the Convention and concerned at any diminution of its on-going importance. ACF for example has joined the many voices of concern which are discussed in detail by other authors over the threats to the Great Barrier Reef particularly by major resource development, ports and shipping (See chapter by Day).

There is still much to do. The early listing of Australian World Heritage sites brought attention to both natural and Aboriginal heritage, notably Kakadu and Uluru, but also the long overdue recognition of the antiquity of

Australian Aboriginal culture through Tasmanian Wilderness and Willandra Lakes. More recently there is increasing awareness of the way in which cultural heritage is intertwined with natural heritage and the indivisibility of these two strands for the Traditional Owners of country. This has also led to the understanding that those Traditional Owners must be afforded the opportunity to give their 'full free, prior and informed consent' to use of Country, including nominations for listing to the National and World Heritage lists.

The Australian Conservation Foundation has adopted as policy the need for such consent as essential to genuine understanding of, and commitment to, reconciliation and healing between new and old cultures living in Australia.

The cultural values of the Wet Tropics World Heritage area will finally soon receive recognition on the National Heritage list after many years of absence. Yet almost 30 years after the Wuthathi and environment groups stood shoulder to shoulder to protect the great natural and

Shelburne Bay on Cape York is place of stunning environmental and cultural values – will it be recognised as World Heritage?
Photo © K.Trapnell, Wet Tropics Images



cultural values of Shelburne Bay on Cape York Peninsula from mining, this magnificent region remains without formal recognition or protection.

Another key priority for the Australian environment movement is the strength and integrity of Australia's national environmental laws. Various heritage protection laws were combined into the Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act in 1999, codifying Australia's responses to its various obligations under international treaties, using the external affairs head of power of the Constitution. This had the effect of giving the Commonwealth capacity to override the States on matters of national environmental significance including impacts on World Heritage.

The broadly discretionary nature of the Act means that the Commonwealth is not strictly required to protect threatened species, and indeed it has failed to do so on several important occasions, such as commercially exploited fish species which from an ecological perspective are threatened or endangered. However, the Act has also allowed the Commonwealth to block environmentally damaging development proposals being championed by the states and or private sector.

In this respect, it has served as a crucial safeguard to rein in pro-development State Governments.

However, in 2012, proposals were tabled with the Council of Australian Governments for the Commonwealth to delegate decision making powers to the States. If this occurred, it would leave the Commonwealth powerless to prevent the destruction of nationally and internationally significant natural and cultural sites. While the Commonwealth has not yet moved to delegate these critical powers, the issue remains a live and significant threat to our natural and cultural heritage.

Conclusion

So here, in this island continent, World Heritage is about recognising, celebrating, looking after, and benefiting from our natural and cultural treasures. We have our World Heritage places because Australians chose to act, to recognise, to protect. This is the legacy of a nation and, in particular its environment movement, choosing to value and protect World Heritage. We are still on this journey. Some of our great natural, cultural and historic areas of undoubted universal value are not recognised, are not protected. ACF has its own list of 'Missing Icons' (see Figure 1. and chapter by Mosley).

The decision of the World Heritage Committee in mid-2012 to keep a watching brief on whether the Great Barrier Reef should be listed as 'World Heritage In Danger' should be a wakeup call to all Australians that development pressures are threatening some of our existing World Heritage areas.

Protecting our special natural and cultural places, and giving them the recognition they deserve, requires a rigorous assessment of what is required to ensure our natural life support systems can function at the ecological, cultural and social level. Only then can we make well informed decisions about economic activities that might be appropriate with and adjacent to these places. It should not be an exercise in deciding what is possible within the constraints of current political limitations and out-dated economic thinking.

Millions of people have been delighted and inspired by the sense of wonder gained from jumping in the water with a mask and snorkel to see the Great Barrier Reef from below the surface. Only then is it possible to appreciate the hundreds of colourful, unusual, beautiful and bizarre life forms to be found on a coral reef.

World Heritage in Australia provides not only for the protection of our outstanding heritage for future generations of the world, but opportunities for each of us to experience the wonder and inspiration of such amazing places. Australia's World Heritage sites hold



Figure 1

this great gift of wonder and inspiration now, for the next generation of Australians, and for the rest of the world.

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Links

For more information about ACF's environmental campaigns and history, please visit www.acfonline.org.au

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Biographies

Denise Boyd

Denise was the Campaigns Director for the Australian Conservation Foundation from early 2006 to December 2012. She has twenty years' experience working in Australia and internationally on environmental, conservation and animal welfare issues. While with ACF she was an Executive Member of the Australian Committee for IUCN, and led ACF's delegation to IUCN World Congress in 2008 and 2012. She is a Board member of the Antarctic and Southern Ocean Coalition and a General Assembly member of Greenpeace Australia Pacific.

Don Henry

Don Henry has been the CEO of the Australian Conservation Foundation since 1998. His long career began in the 1980s with campaigns to protect Moreton Island, Great Barrier Reef Islands, the rainforests of north Queensland and Cape York. As Director of the Wildlife Preservation Society of Queensland and the editor of *Wildlife Australia* he succeeded in generating grassroots support for conservation among both rural and city people. He then worked for the World Wide Fund for Nature (first in Australia, then in Washington DC) and during this time he co-chaired a global forest initiative with the World Bank designed to conserve 250 million hectares of forests. In 1991 he was awarded a Global 500 Environment Award from the United Nations Environment Program. He has served as a Commissioner with the Australian Heritage Commission and President of the Australian Committee for the International Union for the Conservation of Nature.