

# Setting Best Practice Standards for World Heritage Management

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Australia boasts nineteen World Heritage properties which have been accepted by the international community and World Heritage Committee as having outstanding universal value. They are precious and part of humanity's inheritance. We have an obligation to nurture and conserve them, to present them to the current generation and transmit them to future generations. But does our current management regime for these exceptional places meet contemporary best-practice standards?

The Australian *State of the Environment Report 2011* (DSEWPaC, 2011) concludes that Australia is recognised internationally for its leadership in heritage management. The Australian Natural Heritage Charter (AHC and ACIUCN, 2002), the *Burra Charter* (Australia ICOMOS, 1999), and the *Ask First guidelines* (AHC, 2002) for Indigenous heritage were all best-practice benchmarks of their time. From a World Heritage perspective, adaptive management in the Tasmanian Wilderness, the *Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Outlook Report* (GBRMPA, 2009), co-management in Kakadu and Uluru-Kata Tjuta, and the Strategic Plan for the Greater Blue Mountains (DECC, 2009) offer worthy exemplars. However, there is work to do if we are to maintain a pre-eminent position in World Heritage management and to keep our outstanding places exceptional.

There have been significant achievements since Australian properties were first included on the World Heritage List in 1981. We have an established process for identification and listing; collaborative arrangements between the Commonwealth, States and some Traditional Owners; a suite of management plans prepared in accordance with national legislation; excellent interpretation; and visitor/tourism opportunities. Some World Heritage properties provide substantial opportunities for Indigenous engagement and involvement. Many are supported by advisory and scientific committees and/or executive officers.

But our World Heritage places are subject to increasing threats. These include the impacts of climate change, increasing invasive species, population pressures and shifts, increased development (especially resource extraction projects) and loss of traditional knowledge and skills. The 2012 *World Heritage Committee Reactive Mission Report on the Great Barrier Reef*



The Jenolan Cave complex in the Blue Mountains is an ancient landscape of high geo-diversity value. Photo © P. Figgis

*Marine Park* (Badman and Douvère, 2012) highlights the potential impact on World Heritage values from actions undertaken on adjacent lands, as well as the danger of incremental cumulative impacts. Any best-practice approach must actively address these contemporary threats to World Heritage values.

In Australia, World Heritage is managed under a cascading regulatory regime. Australia, as the 'State Party' to the World Heritage Convention (the Convention), has a range of important obligations. For example, under Article 5 of the Convention there are obligations to ensure that World Heritage has a function in the life of the community, to establish services for protection and conservation, to present natural and cultural heritage, to develop scientific and technical studies, to provide legal and financial support measures, and to foster centres of excellence (UNESCO, 1972).

In practice, these obligations and the specific technical requirements and processes set out in the *Operational Guidelines* (UNESCO, 2012) to the Convention are addressed through the *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999* (EPBC Act) and the recently agreed Australian Intergovernmental Agreement on World Heritage (Intergovernmental Agreement). The EPBC Act provides a range of measures, including prescriptive regulations for the content of management plans. The Intergovernmental Agreement sets out a series of high-level principles and specifies the roles and responsibilities of Commonwealth, State and Territory governments. Implementation of the Intergovernmental Agreement is overseen by the Ministerial Standing Council on Environment and Water. Significantly, the Intergovernmental Agreement also sets out particular roles for the Australian World Heritage Indigenous Network (AWHIN) and the Australian World Heritage Advisory Committee (AWHAC), which were established in 2008 and 2009 respectively.

The AWHAC includes representation from Australian World Heritage Areas and AWHIN. The AWHAC is a best-practice, innovative initiative, based on the idea that a peak body can connect the places and their people with decision makers, and can identify cross-cutting national issues and opportunities. The AWHAC advises the Standing Council on Environment and Water through a Senior Officials Committee. This advice is focused on common issues—national policies and programs, cultural protocols, research and monitoring—which transcend individual World Heritage property and State/Territory boundaries. AWHAC also provides a valuable forum for sharing knowledge and experience, a touchstone for considering programs and priorities and an opportunity for proactive initiatives such as national promotion. Since its establishment, AWHAC has

identified major national World Heritage issues, including Indigenous engagement and cultural protocols, approaches to presentation, communication and tourism, major threats, applied research and research priorities, and resourcing. The AWHAC meetings that have occurred 'in person' have proven to be extremely valuable, but there have been none since 2010. Current resourcing levels within the Commonwealth Department are such that liaison through teleconferences is likely to be the mechanism by which AWHAC meets for the foreseeable future.

The AWHAC has embarked upon a process to prepare a set of 'principles and standards' for Australian World Heritage management. While the details of this project are still under development, these principles and standards are intended to provide advice to government, managers and other stakeholders about the national approach to compliance with the World Heritage Convention, the Operational Guidelines, relevant legislation, and the Intergovernmental Agreement. It is expected that the evolving principles and standards will also draw on the 1996 Richmond Communiqué, as well as more recent work by the Australian Committee of the International Union for Conservation of Nature (ACIUCN) and the Australia International Council on Monuments and Sites. A wide array of approaches and issues might be incorporated in national principles and standards.

The Convention and Operational Guidelines provide guidance about identification and assessment, but it would be valuable to focus on what might be included within an Australian Tentative List for World Heritage nomination. Techniques for identifying appropriate boundaries and buffer zones might be specified. Consideration could be given to adjacent lands and off-site impacts. Internal processes might also be addressed. For example, the current procedure for nomination or re-nomination to the World Heritage List requires prior inclusion of the same place on the National Heritage List, based on corresponding value or values. However, there is a significant current 'bottle-neck' in the National Heritage List assessment process: in the 2012-13 year the work program for National Heritage List assessment includes only one place - the Coral Sea. Even iconic places that are already included on the 'Priority Assessment List' by the Australian Heritage Council and Minister are not part of a current active assessment process.

Protection of heritage values is an obvious overarching objective. In terms of future directions it might be useful to address fundamental requirements for effective statutory controls and related processes. Simply, are our laws adequate to honour and fulfil the requirements



View from Mt Eliza. Photo © Michael Legge Wilkinson, Lord Howe Island Board

of the Convention? There is a current move away from reactive decision making to proactive strategic assessment. This aligns well with the implications arising from the findings in the Great Barrier Reef Mission Report in relation to the best methodology to avoid cumulative impact. But how should that principle be applied in practice? What are the appropriate benchmarks or thresholds for 'significant impact' and/or 'outstanding universal value'? Is 'rehabilitation' a legitimate general objective or would a more sophisticated values-based assessment model be more appropriate, both within World Heritage properties and on adjacent lands?

Preparation of principles and standards for Australian World Heritage places also offers an opportunity to review the current inflexible EPBC Act regulations regarding management plans. The need for a greater focus on the outcomes that management plans can deliver, rather than the process for their preparation or prescriptive content has already been identified through the Hawke Review (Hawke, 2009) of the EPBC Act.

The Convention specifies that World Heritage should have a function in the life of the community. How does Australia ensure that such community engagement occurs? What are appropriate roles and functions for advisory committees? Which properties need advisory committees or other mechanisms to connect place with community? How should Traditional Owners participate,

not only in the management of those sites which have been listed for Indigenous Cultural reasons, but for other properties where they have an interest? How should the economic or social contribution of World Heritage places be measured or understood?

There has been considerable progress in Indigenous participation in World Heritage management, but there are still inconsistent approaches, confusing systems and inadequate resources. What methods should be used to seek input or obtain consent? Are there general principles that can embed the rights and traditions of Traditional Owners and other Indigenous stakeholders within World Heritage management? How should AWHIN be resourced and what are the key functions of this group?

Threats must also be addressed, as must opportunities. Tourism is both - a vital element in community engagement and communication of values, but at the same time an agent of change and cause of impact. How should tourism be managed: through regulation or through the use of market forces to promote appropriate behaviour, or both? Are industry partnerships appropriate; is there a relevant, useful national standard or practice? Should there be World Heritage 'branding', as occurs in countries such as the United States of America?



The floodplains of the Alligator Rivers, Kakadu National Park support an abundance of wildlife which has sustained a rich Indigenous culture for millennia. Photo © Sally Greenaway, Commonwealth of Australia

Arguably climate change represents the greatest current threat to World Heritage values in Australia (Commonwealth, 2009). We are already witnessing altered wildfire regimes, changes to vegetation communities, and increases in the number and penetration of invasive species. World Heritage properties are potentially extremely important refuges, as well as laboratories for studying resilience and the local-scale adaptive management that is needed - bearing in mind the current global focus on carbon pricing and emission reduction.

By any logical measure, places with outstanding universal value deserve priority for applied research. By and large we have not delivered on the obligation to foster centres of excellence. Yet World Heritage properties are, in many ways, ideal crucibles for developing and fine-tuning techniques for monitoring management effectiveness, for addressing invasive species, for providing refuges for species under pressure, and for using scientific, social and economic evidence as a basis for decision making.

The connection between such applied research and our international obligation for periodic reporting is self-evident. There is a compelling argument that World Heritage warrants greater priority, to the point of preferential funding status with the Australian Research Council.

It is not simply applied research that warrants such support. There are also opportunities for important skills development. The looming crisis in heritage trades skills, as the small population of aged practitioners retires without training a new generation (Godden et al., 2010), offers a case in point. Not only could World

Heritage properties blossom as centres of research excellence, through strategic tertiary institutional and other relationships, Australia also has the capacity to share its emerging expertise and knowledge by actively supporting World Heritage management throughout the Asia-Pacific region.

Many of these factors combine within an overall principle that World Heritage warrants greater priority in resource allocation. We have international treaty obligations under the Convention; it is illogical that some of the resources required to fulfil these obligations are currently allocated on a non-recurrent basis through a competitive bidding process. A regular World Heritage budgetary appropriation, or at least a dedicated World Heritage stream within the current Caring for Our Country program, represents a minimum reasonable commitment from the Commonwealth.

World Heritage is a national issue, requiring national leadership, even though there are agreed State and Territory management arrangements. In Australia, the World Heritage world is changing - our exceptional places are threatened by climate change impacts, by invasive species and by all manner of development. On the positive side, recognition and involvement of Indigenous Traditional Owners is increasing and tourism is being embraced. Do we want a consistent approach to these issues and opportunities? Does World Heritage status warrant research funding priority? Should there be an Australian 'World Heritage' brand?

We are living through times of reduced resources and increasing threats, but our inter-generational obligation remains: to cherish and transmit our World Heritage properties. A national strategic approach is needed.

The 'Keeping the Outstanding Exceptional' symposium discussions and communiqué will help inform developing best-practice standards for Australian World Heritage management.

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Professor Richard Mackay is a Partner of Godden Mackay Logan, Heritage Consultants and Chair of the Australian World Heritage Advisory Committee and Greater Blue Mountains World Heritage Area Advisory Committee. He was a member of the State of the Environment 2011 Committee with particular responsibility for heritage. He teaches at La Trobe University and is a Research Associate at the University of Sydney. He is a former member of the NSW Heritage Council and Director of the National Trust, and a former Getty Conservation Institute Research Scholar. He has worked in heritage management throughout Australia and in Asia on sites ranging between Kakadu National Park, Port Arthur, Sydney Harbour Bridge and the Royal Exhibition Building. He is currently the Project Director for the Angkor Heritage Management Framework project in Cambodia. In 2003 Professor Mackay was made a Member of the Order of Australia for services to archaeology and cultural heritage.