

Engaging Indigenous Communities in World Heritage declarations: processes and practice

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Australia became one of the first nations to ratify the World Heritage Convention in 1974. Since then, nineteen Australian sites have been inscribed on the World Heritage List, including four sites for natural and cultural outstanding universal values; Kakadu National Park, Uluru-Kata Tjuta National Park, Willandra Lakes and Tasmanian Wilderness World Heritage Areas (DSEWPaC, 2012a).

While these four properties alone have been recognised as having both outstanding universal natural and cultural values, to many Indigenous Australians¹ all of Australia is a cultural landscape alive with tradition, custom and history. Indigenous Australians have been occupying, managing and caring for this country, Australia, for well over 60, 000 years (DSEWPaC, 2012b). Australian Indigenous peoples make up approximately 2.5% of the total population; that is an estimated population of 517,200 of Australia's residents (ABS, 2006). Of Australia's 7.7million square kilometres, the estate of Indigenous Australians covers 1.7million square kilometres or 22% of Australia (Altman, 2012). For traditional custodians and owners of these homeland estates, customary lore and obligations and the management and protection of country, culture, language and traditions are intrinsically linked. This link innately connects Indigenous Peoples and country and is core to their existence.

At a national level, Australia uses a number of tools to identify, categorise and manage our unique Heritage. In particular, there are four clear categories of heritage which are relevant to Indigenous Australians; they are:

- World Heritage: heritage that is of outstanding universal value and is (or should be) included on the World Heritage List (DSEWPaC, 2012c, d).
- National Heritage: natural and cultural places of outstanding heritage value to the nation and which could or should be on the National Heritage List (DSEWPaC, 2012d).

1 For the purpose of this paper, Indigenous Australians refer to Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.



The Buff, Mossman Gorge – Far North Qld
– courtesy of Andrew Picone Australian Conservation Foundation

- Indigenous Heritage: an important part of Australian heritage; Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have a long historical and ongoing link with the land (DSEWPaC, 2012b).
- Commonwealth Heritage: natural, Indigenous and historic heritage places on Commonwealth lands and waters or under Australian Government control (DSEWPaC, 2012e).

The engagement of Australian Indigenous Peoples in World Heritage declarations and or nomination processes gives rise to some concerns and questions. In my view, some aspects and arrangements in the four Australian sites inscribed on the World Heritage List for natural and cultural values were inadequate. Specifically there has been a lack of appropriate recognition and inclusion of Indigenous Australians' traditional knowledge, rights and obligations to country. The four sites have mixed and different management arrangements (jointly and other) and varying degrees of decision making roles by the traditional Indigenous owners of the properties.

Currently, in Cape York Peninsula, there is a process in its early stages for consideration of a potential World Heritage nomination. The original intent of the nomination process is to meet two key conditions; first that the nomination includes both natural and cultural values of appropriate areas that meet World Heritage criteria; and secondly, that the potential nomination will only proceed if it has the consent of the Traditional Aboriginal owners of the region (Australian Labor Party, 2007; Queensland Labor Party, 2009; Burke, 2012). However, the change of State Government in Queensland in March 2012 has seen the Queensland Government withdraw from the current negotiations and discussions with the Federal Government and the wider community stakeholder groups. However it has vowed not to stand in the way of a potential World Heritage nomination if the Traditional Aboriginal owners and local community want the nomination to proceed (Elks, 2012; Powell, 2012).

If this nomination succeeds and reflects both of these conditions, then satisfies the World Heritage Committee, it will be a first for Australia and a unique international example that can demonstrate respect for Indigenous Peoples ownership, rights and responsibilities to their traditional country. Further, it is anticipated that it would also reflect, support and respect the principles of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, in particular the principle of free, prior and informed consent by the traditional Aboriginal Peoples (UNDRIP, 2008).

On the international stage, there have been several attempts to include the involvement of Indigenous Peoples and cultural heritage formally at the World Heritage Convention level. For example, the World Heritage Committee held the first ever World Heritage Indigenous Peoples Forum in 2000. The forum highlighted continued concerns for the "lack of involvement of Indigenous Peoples in the protection of their knowledge, traditions and cultural values which apply to their ancestral lands within all comprising sites now designated as World Heritage area" (Tichen, 2002). A key recommendation from this forum was to establish a World Heritage Indigenous Peoples Council of Experts – WHIPCOE. However, when the World Heritage Committee met in 2001 it did not support the establishment of WHIPCOE (Tichen, 2002). More recently, discussions have gradually continued to explore options for further involvement and recognition of Indigenous Peoples and their knowledge, traditions and cultural values into World Heritage dialogues.

Similarly, Australia, under the Environment Protection and Heritage Council of Ministers (EPHC), established a World Heritage Advisory Committee (AWHAC) to provide advice to the Commonwealth and State and Territory Ministers on "issues of a national, cross-cutting nature that affect Australia's World Heritage sites" (DSEWPaC, 2012f). This committee also includes two representatives from the Australian World Heritage Indigenous Network (AWHIN) which provides direct advice on Indigenous perspectives of management of Australia's World Heritage properties (DSEWPaC, 2012f). However, neither AWHAC nor AWHIN have current or ongoing Commonwealth funding. AWHAC has met only three times; the last time in 2010 and is now compelled to confer by teleconference (DSEWPaC, 2012f).

The World Heritage Convention aims "to promote co-operation among nations to protect heritage around the world that is of such outstanding universal value that its conservation is important for current and future generations" (DSEWPaC, 2012c). Over many years Australia has played a role as a member of the World Heritage Committee, in achieving this aim and to further its own role and commitment to World Heritage (DSEWPaC, 2011a). According to Australia's World Heritage Committee Term Report for 2007 – 2011, Australia prides itself on how it "cemented its reputation as an international leader and noted itself as a champion of operational reform" (DSEWPaC, 2011). This may be so, but the leadership does not apparently extend to Indigenous heritage. The term report for 2007 – 2011 does not mention the word 'Indigenous' or 'Aboriginal People' once throughout its 17 pages.

Furthermore, within existing management arrangements within Australia's constitutional provisions and State, Territory and Commonwealth jurisdictions – how do Australian Indigenous traditional owners become more than just 'stakeholders' on an advisory committee discussing their culture, traditions and country - the core of their whole world view and existence.

There is now increasing evidence in Australia of significant biological diversity occurring in areas where Indigenous Australians' traditional ecological knowledge, rights and obligations to country are most strongly reflected (Altman, 2012). Natural resource management, maintenance of biodiversity values and Indigenous traditional ecological knowledge are interlinked, and the existence of these overlapping values should be no surprise (Altman, 2012). The Australian Government recognise that; "all levels of government, recognising the high biodiversity and other environmental values of Indigenous management lands, have responded to caring for country initiatives through funding, partnerships and other support" (DSEWPaC, 2011b).

As a signatory to the World Heritage Convention, Australia still has a long way to go, to provide its Indigenous Peoples with more appropriate resourcing, support, involvement and recognition of their role in protecting and managing Australia's natural and cultural resources. Australia is unfortunately not exceptional, inadequate engagement of the Indigenous Peoples and little recognition for Indigenous cultural knowledge and local Indigenous organisations are common issues among many of the Worlds' Indigenous peoples whose traditional country lies within a World Heritage area (Disko, 2012).

Key recommendations that would support and achieve better engagement of Indigenous People and communities with respect to World Heritage declarations and or nominations include:

- real and strategic involvement in the protection of cultural and natural values;
- real and strategic involvement in the management and decision making of the area;
- support and recognition for and of self-determined processes and protocols that enhance cultural governance arrangements; and
- true partnership arrangements that reflect joint approaches for seeking and administrating resources and assistance with financial management.

Furthermore a key recommendation identified in the recent State of the Environment 2011 Report states: "Overall, the outlook for Australia's heritage will depend on government leadership and two key factors: firstly,



willingness to undertake thorough assessments that lead to comprehensive natural and cultural heritage inventories, and truly representative areas of protected land; and, secondly, our ability to respond to emerging threats through improved resourcing and more flexible heritage management approaches and processes” (State of the Environment 2011 Committee, 2011, 16).

Australia needs to recognise the importance of Indigenous cultural heritage values to the broader Australian nation. We as Australians need to realise that the most effective protectors, conservationists, educators and interpreters of our outstanding Indigenous cultural heritage values are the Aboriginal people themselves.

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Recognition for Indigenous cultural knowledge is critical in the future of Australia's World Heritage areas. Photo © K. Trapnell, Wet Tropics Images



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At the time of the conference Leah was an Australian Conservation Foundation staff member and it was in this role she participated in the World Heritage Symposium and submitted this chapter. She now works for CSIRO.

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Biography

Ms Leah Talbot is a descendant of the Kuku Yalanji People from the Bloomfield River area in Cape York Peninsula. Since 2003 she has worked with the Australian Conservation Foundation as the Cape York Program Officer. Leah has experience in environmental management, high level Indigenous negotiations and developing collaborative Indigenous research methodologies, participative planning with Indigenous communities. Her employment history also incorporates extensive time working with Indigenous community organisations in the areas of native title, cultural heritage, oral and community history, and natural and cultural resource management. Generally, her interests have always included social justice issues, Indigenous peoples strive for recognition of rights and responsibilities, environmental issues, protection of cultural and natural resources, and finding ways and methods to develop a better future for our planet and people. Leah has a Masters of Science (with an Indigenous Land Management Techniques Thesis) and a Bachelor of Science in Environmental Studies.