# Template FOR INPUT INTO THE

**AUSTRALIAN HERITAGE STRATEGY**

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| Overview  This template should be used to provide comments on the content of the Australian Heritage Strategy. | |
| Contact Details | |
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| **Date:** | 28 May 2014 |
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| Questions  Please add your comments for some or all of the questions provided with the Strategy’s three high level themes below. If you have other information you wish to provide, please add this in the “Other comments” field. | |
| 1. **Improve National Leadership**   What are the most important things the Australian Government should be doing to offer leadership in heritage?  How can the Australian Government provide guidance and support for our national heritage—while still empowering other government, industry and community members to take responsibility and get involved?  What priority areas are important to you, your organisation or group?  What practical actions would you suggest to improve national heritage leadership? | |
| The Australian government should lead the way in linking practical heritage work to scholarship; Australia has a vibrant heritage scholarship which is not evident in this document. The lack of scholarly input is particularly evident when it comes to the question: **what is heritage?**  It would be useful to bring definitions of the concept much earlier than p. 12 and the small box on p.15. Most scholars in the field of heritage work with the concept of heritage as a form of representation; the strategy is hampered by referring to heritage in such a way that it seems to be outside representation and historical contexts. If the Department of Environment worked with the concept of heritage as being a form of representation then the vagaries of historical fashion would be more effectively countered in the future.  The apparent self-evident quality of the often assumed material foundation of heritage tends to occlude theoretical considerations. The alarming finding by Deakin University (p. 25) that many people understand heritage as simply “history” and “old buildings” underscores the urgent need for government leadership in developing a critical public history / memory sphere. Film culture is a good comparison to heritage culture; like heritage it occupies an everyday, highly accessible part of Australian public life, but is enriched by lively public debate that is virtually absent from heritage representation. Please note that I differentiate between the vigorous public debate accompanying some historical issues, for example, the institutional abuse of children, which takes place via journalism, and the virtual absence of debate about the representation of heritage. The difference between a critical public film culture and its missing heritage counterpart highlights an urgent need for the Department of the Environment to inform its work with the advances of heritage scholars and work towards developing more sophisticated understandings of heritage and fostering debate in the field.  **Celebration**: the concept of celebration frames the strategy and is particularly evident in the Minister’s Forward. I urge you to abandon this concept despite its useful, positive tones in approaching the public. When celebration is used to describe heritage actions it tends to skew what can be called “heritage” towards an easy, non-confrontational approach to representing the past. It also skews heritage actions towards being weighted unevenly in favour of highly aesthetic architecture. There are many aspects of Australia’s past that we do not celebrate, for example, the taking of the Stolen Generation, nevertheless, we understand a duty to remember. Commemoration would be a better approach to heritage combined with the concept of critical public debate outlined above.  **Contribution to international heritage standards setting and guidance**: the aim to contribute internationally is incongruous in light of the non-ratification of the UNESCO “Convention on the Protection of the Underwater Cultural Heritage 2001” adopted by UNESCO 3 November 2001. It came into force on 2 January 2009 following ratification by 20 UNESCO member states. As of 28 April this year, it has been ratified by 48 UNESCO members (including the non-state member Palestine), but not by Australia. I urge attention to the ratification as a matter of urgency. | |
| 1. **Pursue Innovative Partnerships**   What partnerships are most needed within the heritage sector?  What heritage roles and responsibilities should be led by governments, peak heritage organisations or community groups in the 21st century?  How should resources be shared through heritage partnerships to ensure the greatest return on agreed priorities?  Can you provide examples of successful innovative partnerships you or your organisation have established? | |
| The Australian Government needs to partner with scholars. | |
| 1. **Enable encourage communities to understand and care for their heritage**   What should the Australian heritage sector be doing to help the Australian community better engage in heritage activities?  How can a shared understanding of our national heritage be developed and best celebrated together?  Do you have any examples of activities that have been successful in promoting local heritage to a broader audience?  What is the role of technology and new media in providing greater community access to heritage? | |
| The community needs to be assisted to understand that critique of heritage places is possible. | |
| **Other comments** | |
| **Document construction**: the strategy is written in an uneven fashion. It makes broad statements about approaches to heritage then undercuts the statements with highly detailed commitments which do not expand the concept, for example on p.10, the securing of a loan of Matthew Flinders 1804 map of Australia sits uneasily next to “promoting greater knowledge and engagement with our heritage”. I understand that the Flinders map happens to be of particular interest to the current Minister, but the concept of a loan is out of step with the ambitions of the document.  Please consider removing all of the current commitments to an appendix, they hamper the reading of the document for its broad policy statements.  **Stories and Themes**: on p.7 there is a proposal to “prioritise thematic studies” with the Australian Heritage Council, however, the strategy has blurred definitions of what is a story and what is a theme. The use of themes to structure the Australian past can have the unfortunate consequence of pushing specific, highly individual events and stories under convenient, inclusive headings thus nullifying their unique character. In comparison to themes, stories are always specific, retaining their local character and one-off quality. They do not necessarily contribute to wider themes, but must be remembered. At the public consultation in Perth on 15 May 2014 the representatives of Department of the Environment were unable to differentiate between stories and themes despite questioning of the author of the strategy. There are dangers in confusing these two concepts, the main concern is for the loss of unique qualities of particular stories as they are sucked under bureaucratic “theme”. Another danger is that unique places and stories will be ignored on the grounds that they are already representatively included under an existing theme.  Not all stories will find a neat place under an existing theme. For example, as recently as 1977, Judge Barwick saw no place for Dutch shipwrecks off the Western Australian coast in the dominant English version of Australian history, giving more weight to Captions Cook’s cannon than an entire Dutch shipwreck. Of course Australia did not have heritage legislation at that time and thinking in the field was undeveloped. Nevertheless, I quote below from the case in order to illustrate the pitfalls of thinking in established historical categories which make it difficult to admit stories that do not fit. Unwittingly, Judge Barwick adopted a limited view of heritage which found it difficult to find a place for Dutch history in Australia’s hegemonic English narrative:  With a degree of artistry [the WA Museum describes the four Dutch East India Company shipwrecks off the WA coast] as "historic". So they might properly be styled in the history of navigation but scarcely in the history of the Colony or State of Western Australia. Doubtless the display in the Museum of items recovered from the wreck could enhance the effectiveness of the Museum and of its educational functions. So, indeed, might the display of one of the cannon from Cook's Endeavour. But in neither case would that circumstance make a law as to the possession of a part of the bed of the sea a law for the government of the State of Western Australia. Cook’s cannon has indeed more relationship to the history of the Australian colonies than did the activities of the Dutch East India Company and the voyages and disasters of its fleet. *Robinson v Western Australian Museum* [1977] HCA 46, 138 CLR 283, per Barwick CJ, at pp 295-6.  I make the analogy of this kind of thinking to the effect of heritage themes in the bureaucratic process. | |