**SUBMISSION ON THE DRAFT AUSTRALIAN HERITAGE STRATEGY**

**From: Michael Ockwell, former Chair, Willandra Lakes Region World Heritage Area Community Management Council, and former member, Australian World Heritage Advisory Council.**

**7 June 2014**

I welcome the Commonwealth’s initiative in developing the draft strategy and am pleased to have the opportunity to comment.

While I support the general thrust and tenor of the document and endorse its three elements or themes, ‘National Leadership, Innovative Partnerships and Community Engagement’, I have the following concerns or comments to make:

1. I do not consider the draft strategy gives sufficient prominence to Australia’s World Heritage sites and would like to see a separate strategy developed for their support, resourcing (where appropriate) and management - they are the re-eminent heritage sites in Australia and should be afforded that status in terms of management strategies, in resourcing, funding and other support. I believe this is the only way Australian governments can be sure they are meeting their international (UNESCO) obligations in relation to these sites.

1. It follows that, in terms of ‘National Leadership’, I believe this is vital, particularly in the context of world heritage site management and while I am pleased to see the need for national leadership recognised, I would like to have seen more specific and action-oriented Commonwealth commitments directed at world heritage management in the draft Strategy. For example, one of the most pressing needs at Willandra (and has been for years) is the commitment, together with government funding (interest has been shown by a philanthropic body to provide some funding) for the construction of a purpose-built ‘Keeping Place’, a repository for repatriated ancestral remains and other artefacts. In my view, it is a blight on Australia’s world heritage management that to date we have been unsuccessful in securing this vital infrastructure, which goes to the heart of acknowledging and respecting the region’s Outstanding Universal Values, and properly preserving the evidence of over 40,000 years of continuous Indigenous occupation of this continent. I would have thought a ‘Keeping Place’ at Willandra would rank higher than restoration works at Port Arthur or indeed completing a strategic assessment of the Great Barrier Reef. Accordingly, I would like to see a ‘Keeping Place’ at Willandra included in the specific commitments in the section headed ‘Priorities a- Improved support for iconic World Heritage sites’, in section one of the draft – ‘Improve National Leadership’.

Also, in terms of the ‘National Leadership’ theme, I would like to see mention in the Strategy of the Australian World Heritage Advisory Council (AWHAC) and the Australian World Heritage Indigenous Network (AWHIN), admittedly both bodies set up by the previous Commonwealth Government. As a foundation member of AWHAC I consider it was a worthwhile body, which could have done a great deal more, if its funding had not been substantially cut and it had been reduced to the occasional teleconference. Likewise, AWHIN provided a very useful voice for Indigenous people involved in world heritage management.

1. I support the second theme of the draft strategy, ‘Pursue Innovative Partnerships’, so long as it is not seen or used by the Commonwealth as a basis or justification for withdrawing funding or other resourcing support for heritage management, particularly world heritage site management. The Willandra Lakes Region World Heritage Area, for example, has suffered for years from both the lack and uncertainty of funding. The opportunities for developing ‘innovative partnerships’ to attract non-government funding have been limited and despite efforts, so far largely unsuccessful. Although it is a form of government funding, we have had some success in attracting catchment management funding on a project basis. Likewise, we have had moderate success in tapping into funding from various Commonwealth and NSW government programs over the years. However, this type of funding provides no long term certainty for employment generation (including Indigenous training and employment) or on-going management. Inevitably, in my view, the Willandra will always be reliant on strong and sustained government support, both at the Commonwealth and NSW levels. Indeed, without that secure and continued funding support, developing attractive opportunities for privately-sourced investment, both philanthropic and commercial, will continue to be difficult.

On a more positive note, the ‘partnership’ the Willandra has enjoyed over many years with the NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS) has been outstanding, in terms of ‘in-kind’ and other support. Admittedly, Mungo National Park accounts for a large proportion of the World Heritage Area. However, the NPWS’s involvement has far exceeded its park responsibilities. It is to be hoped that that level of support continues into the future.

1. In relation to the third theme, ‘Encourage communities to understand and care for their heritage’, I would suggest that the Strategy include a specific commitment or action along the lines of developing protocols or standards for community involvement in heritage management. In my view, for a number of years the Willandra was a model of effective community, Traditional Owner and stakeholder involvement in co-operative world heritage management, through the Community Management Council, the Technical and Scientific Advisory Committee and the Mungo National Park Joint Management Committee. However, more recently, sadly difficulties have been encountered, largely due to the actions of a few, with very serious consequences for world heritage management. Currently, the Willandra advisory committees are not functioning and are awaiting reconstitution. While this is primarily a matter for the NSW administration, I have been in correspondence with Minister Greg Hunt requesting his assistance with this issue.

While efforts were made locally over time to develop and put in place standards of behaviour and other governance-type protocols, it would assist, in my view, if these were developed nationally. It is the in the Commonwealth’s interest, as the funder of local advisory committees such as those that operate in the Willandra, to ensure that they operate effectively and in accordance with normal governance and participatory principles and that members of those committees accept and abide by those principles. The first of the ‘Proposed Actions’ in Part 3.d of the document (p.26), could be adjusted to take up this point.

Finally, a couple of comments, if I may, on the structure of the draft:

* I think the Executive Summary is too long and contains too much detail, relative to the body of the document, and
* I could not find in the document where the persons in the ‘group photo’ on page 27 of the draft are identified. If that photo is to be included in the final version it should be captioned.

Again, thank you for the opportunity of commenting on the draft and I look forward to seeing the release of the completed Strategy.

Michael Ockwell