

## ESSAY: WHAT IS HERITAGE?

### Susan Tonkin

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### WHAT IS THE AUSTRALIAN COMMUNITY'S UNDERSTANDING OF THE TERM?

"Heritage" in the broadest sense is that which is inherited. Everything which the ancestors bequeath may be called heritage: landscapes, structures, objects, traditions. Humans have understood the concept of heritage ever since they developed artefacts and language.

People also discriminate between things which are worth inheriting and passing on and other things which they prefer to forget. They may decide to preserve only structures considered grand or beautiful, or traditions and legends which are inspiring or useful. A constant process of selection is under way, both conscious and unconscious, as each generation decides which elements of its inheritance to keep and which to throw away.

What Australians understand by heritage can be inferred from a broad range of contemporary commentary, discussion and of course legislation. Forms of heritage which are cherished by local communities, celebrated in Heritage Week, defended in conservation initiatives or regulated by government include: buildings, places and precincts; archaeological sites and relics; landscape, environment, gardens and trees; movable heritage (artefacts) and intangible heritage (customs, language, stories, beliefs).

However, a study by Heath McDonald in 2006<sup>1</sup> found that while Australians did define heritage very broadly and understood it to include a wide range of objects, places and experiences, they felt uncertain as to the validity of their own views. People involved in local heritage activity lacked the confidence to ascribe value or significance to their own actions and beliefs, let alone what might constitute national significance.

What heritage means to individuals can also change dramatically over the years. In Australia there have been times when people of Indigenous descent felt compelled to deny or hide their origins, and other times when it was proudly acknowledged. The same has been true of those with convict ancestry, or people from immigrant communities. Built heritage once considered vulgar may look very different after a hundred years (for example the lavish iron lacework of the 19<sup>th</sup> century), or an environment devastated by industry can acquire value because of its historic significance (for example Burra or Queenstown). It follows that any given generation, including our own, may have difficulty determining in its own time things of value which future generations will also value.

Australian heritage legislation also acts as a guide to public understanding, reflecting as it does both the steady growth of interest in heritage in recent decades and the persistence of a fragmented

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<sup>1</sup> McDonald, Heath 2006, *Understanding Public Involvement with Australian Heritage* – Final Research Report, Deakin University.

approach. As various commentators have observed<sup>2</sup>, in legislation natural and cultural heritage are usually considered separately, and there is a further division within cultural heritage between Indigenous and non-Indigenous or “historic” heritage. Those divisions may be narrowing (the 2006 *Australia State of the Environment* report identified an emerging realisation that cultural and natural heritage are integrated, and a recognition by both Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians of intangible heritage and cultural landscapes<sup>3</sup>) but still persist, not least in the public understanding.

### IS THE UNDERSTANDING BASED ON A REASONABLE PREMISE?

Few Australians can claim a truly integrated view of heritage, and evidence of both reasonable and unreasonable assumptions about its meaning are easy to find in contemporary discussion. Some people are able to comprehend heritage in its broadest sense, especially those with a professional background in history or cultural studies. The NSW ‘Heritage Round-table’<sup>4</sup> for example elicited very inclusive definitions from its subjects.

*For me because heritage is about physical things, it’s about buildings, it’s about ruins, it’s about bits of archaeology hidden under the ground ... for me heritage is living with a tangible part of the past, but it’s also about deciding that it’s sufficiently important that we want to make it part of the future, not just part of the present.*

(Carol Liston, Associate Professor, School of Cultural Histories and Futures, University of Western Sydney Nepean)<sup>5</sup>

*You can have heritage that derives from community where you may be a train enthusiast and love locomotives, or you may have a particular fondness for certain wildlife or particular forms of entertainment or pastimes. You can also have a broader level of heritage again through ethnic connection ... through class, through locality, so it is a multi-layered thing.*

(Paul Ashton, Lecturer, Department of Writing, Social and Cultural Studies University of Technology, Sydney)<sup>6</sup>

However, other sectors of the community demonstrate an understanding based on quite unreasonable assumptions. Passionate hyperbole is often generated when a perceived threat to some local structure or landscape blurs the distinction between objective heritage value and the community’s emotional investment. Take for example the statement of Geraldine Brooks, who with her sister was campaigning for the preservation of a 1921 beach cottage in Newport, NSW in March 2011.

*"At some point the people of the peninsula are going to have to ask if we are going to pave over every square centimetre, chop down every tree, blot out the sun and the neighbours' views and sacrifice every old and charming house to the siren song of biggest, latest, most ostentatious," Ms Brooks said.*

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<sup>2</sup> For example Johnston, C, “An integrated approach to environment and heritage issues”, paper prepared for the 2006 Australia State of the Environment Committee, Department of Environment and Heritage, Canberra.

<sup>3</sup> Beeton RJS, Buckley Kristal I, Jones Gary J, Morgan Denise, Reichelt Russell E, Trewin Dennis 2006, *Australia State of the Environment 2006*, Independent report to the Australian Government Minister for the Environment and Heritage, section 9.1.

<sup>4</sup> Reported online at <http://www.teachingheritage.nsw.edu.au/section09/>

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.teachingheritage.nsw.edu.au/section09/liston.php>

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.teachingheritage.nsw.edu.au/section09/ashton3.php>

*Pittwater Council said the application was set to be referred for heritage consideration.*<sup>7</sup>

In May 2010 Williamstown, Victoria even experienced a “Public Funeral for Local Democracy” complete with coffin, celebrant and mourners dressed in black, on the grounds that

*...the community had been excluded from democratic process by Minister Madden unilaterally rezoning the site [Commonwealth Reserve, Nelson Place] residential without consulting with Hobsons Bay City Council, the local community or stakeholders. The rezoning had been solely on the developer's application to the Minister - the death of democracy.*<sup>8</sup>

Conversely, misunderstanding can centre on heritage which has been protected, but thus stands in the way of development. This was certainly the case in Melbourne in June 2011, when property developers questioned the choice of certain city buildings for heritage listing. *The Age* ran the story on June 12 under the headline *A victory for heritage in all its brutal glory, or protection for city eyesores?*<sup>9</sup> The comments quoted on this occasion reveal some interesting assumptions.

*The latest list of buildings nominated for heritage protection in the state's capital has been hailed a victory for "Marvellous Melbourne" by the National Trust, but dismissed by others as a disgrace and an insult to architects.*

*The 98 CBD buildings cited in Melbourne City Council's biggest expansion of heritage protection in 30 years include a former venereal disease clinic and a modest bank branch that has been converted into a convenience store.*

*"This has to be a joke," said the Victorian executive director of the Urban Development Institute of Australia, Tony De Domenico.*

*Another contentious nominee is the Hoyts Mid-City Cinemas building on Bourke Street, which was found to be an early example of Brutalist architecture and deserving of heritage protection. Most developers would argue it deserves to be demolished.*

*The AXA building on Collins Street, often regarded as one of Melbourne's worst eyesores, has also been included on the list, which received unanimous support from a council planning committee last week.*

*Mr De Domenico, whose organisation represents hundreds of private developers, said some of the buildings had "zero architectural merit".*

*"This is an insult to architects and connoisseurs of real heritage ... To list a building that has been converted into a 7-Eleven is an absolute disgrace," he said.*

*The council's push to dramatically expand heritage protection was part of a campaign to stymie new construction within the Hoddle Grid, he said.*

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<sup>7</sup> As reported in *The Age* of 8 May 2010, see <http://theage.domain.com.au/real-estate-news/pulitzer-winner-joins-efforts-to-save-beach-house-20110321-1c3wc.html>

<sup>8</sup> As reported on the Save Williamstown web site, see

[http://savewilliamstown.net/Save\\_Williamstown/NEWS/Entries/2010/5/8\\_Public\\_Funeral\\_for\\_Local\\_Democracy.html](http://savewilliamstown.net/Save_Williamstown/NEWS/Entries/2010/5/8_Public_Funeral_for_Local_Democracy.html)

<sup>9</sup> [http://www.theage.com.au/victoria/a-victory-for-heritage-in-all-its-brutal-glory-or-protection-for-city-eyesores-20110611-1fyi5.html?from=age\\_sb](http://www.theage.com.au/victoria/a-victory-for-heritage-in-all-its-brutal-glory-or-protection-for-city-eyesores-20110611-1fyi5.html?from=age_sb)

*"This is obviously an attempt to thwart development. These groups lose credibility when they try to protect buildings that aren't worth protecting," Mr De Domenico said.*

Note the assumptions which underlie these objections: that "real" heritage is attractive to connoisseurs, has recognised architectural merit and is structurally unchanged - conversion supposedly ends its significance. Granting heritage protection to modern or unattractive structures is inexplicable, except of course as a conspiracy to thwart development.

What Melbourne City Council's action actually demonstrated was a broadening and evolving definition of heritage value. *The Age* story<sup>10</sup> continued:

*However, Melbourne Heritage Action spokesman Rohan Storey commended the review, and said recognition of Melbourne's post-war construction era was long overdue, with examples of 1960s Modernism and Brutalism deserving greater protection.*

*"There's probably some of these buildings that the average person would not see as an architectural masterpiece. But some are considered to be the best of their type or period," he said.*

*National Trust conservation manager Paul Roser said he was not surprised that the list had provoked controversy.*

*"It wasn't until recently that the Art Deco movement received widespread recognition for its architectural value," he said.*

*"We think it's exciting that the post-war period is now being regarded the same way.*

*"It's part of the evolution in what determines the notion of heritage."*

Misunderstandings, exaggerations and of course self-interest inevitably cloud discussion of heritage value in the absence of clearly understood definitions. The Melbourne arguments and counter-arguments would at least have served to broaden the community's understanding of heritage by focussing attention on a different kind of architecture, structures not previously considered to have value.

A steady development of heritage understanding in recent decades has been demonstrated by the extension of legislation by the Commonwealth, States and Territories. Provision for natural, Indigenous, historic, maritime and movable heritage was pioneered by the States (*Historic Houses Act* 1971, NSW; *Archaeological and Aboriginal Relics Preservation Act* 1972, Victoria; *Maritime Archaeology Act* 1973, WA; *National Parks and Wildlife Act* 1974, NSW), with the Commonwealth and other States and Territories following on.<sup>11</sup>

Not surprisingly, intangible heritage is absent from this legislation. The intangible is of course difficult to list or register and is consequently neglected by most governments. This is perhaps regrettable, as intangible heritage in the shape of cultural traditions, genealogy and family history is an especially popular form which can contribute greatly to public understanding without investment in bricks and mortar. However Ministers like to be seen opening restored historic buildings or history

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> For an overview of principal Australian heritage legislation to 2006, see Table 4.1 in Productivity Commission 2006, *Conservation of Australia's Historic Heritage Places*, Report No. 37, Canberra, pp 56-57.

exhibitions; oral history programs or storytelling tend not to look like assets and provide fewer photo opportunities.

The broader community is nevertheless comfortable with the concept of intangible heritage as part of the mix, at least judging by its major presence in the Heritage Week events offered throughout Australia in April 2011. The activities listed in the national program<sup>12</sup> provide a useful snapshot of what the public currently understands by the broad term heritage.

- Intangible heritage (customs, language, stories, beliefs): very well represented in the mix, a common program title being “Stories of...”. Examples ranged from “Sharing War Memories” in Brighton, Victoria to “Saumarez Farm Fair with Amazing Stories linking the Saumarez past to the present” in Armidale, NSW. Military history and family history or genealogy appeared to be particular favourites.
- Buildings, places and precincts: also well represented, from a “Sneak Peak” at the Oatlands Gaoler’s Residence, Tasmania, to the Semaphore Historical Walk of esplanade and shops, SA. Cemetery tours were also popular.
- Landscape, environment, gardens and trees: many of these, from the “Gondwana Rainforest Walk, Talk and Tucker” at Iluka, NSW to “The Tree That Became Legend” at Barcaldine, Queensland.
- Movable heritage (artefacts) and collections: plenty of these, ranging from the Bert Tyler Vintage Machinery Museum in Armadale, WA to a historical bottle display in Geelong, Victoria.
- Archaeological sites and relics: rather fewer of these, though one program offered “Archaeology and Restoration of historic Boot Maker’s Shop in Mylor”, SA, and there were other tours of precincts which included archaeological sites relating to European settlement.

However the apparent variety and profusion of Heritage Week activity masks some notable omissions. Indigenous heritage was almost entirely absent, a sole exception being “Images of Aboriginal Australia 1773-1901” at the State Library of SA. This was despite the stress on inclusiveness in the Heritage Week introduction on the Departmental web site:

*Heritage is about the places and stories that make Australia special. It includes our amazing natural places, our rich Indigenous heritage and the diverse historic sites that together reflect our development as a nation*<sup>13</sup>.

In fact non-British heritage of any kind was rare in the program, with just two exceptions: a “Remembering Chinatown Audio Heritage Tour” at the Chinese Museum in Melbourne, and “The Indian connection with Tasmania” at the Queen Victoria Museum & Art Gallery in Launceston. These were rare examples in Heritage Week which amply celebrated the picturesque, cosy or quirky but without notably stretching the parameters of understanding.

Based on the evidence of Heritage Week it seems that Australians do understand heritage to mean many things: they are happy to include steam engines, ghost stories, church architecture, landscape conservation and costumed dance. But in the popular imagination, it seems not to include the stories and cultures of Indigenous people or immigrant communities.

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<sup>12</sup> See <http://www.environment.gov.au/heritage/about/heritage-week/2011-events/index.html>

<sup>13</sup> <http://www.environment.gov.au/heritage/about/heritage-week/intro.html>

Why is this so? Evidence suggests that in other ways, public awareness of Indigenous culture is strong. A “Welcome to country” or acknowledgement of local traditional owners is now common in public ceremonies, and appreciation of Indigenous art is obvious. It is only the link between the concepts “heritage” and “Indigenous” which seems to be missing. In a similar act of cognitive disconnection, public understanding seems blind to the rich heritage of the non-British immigrant communities.

One explanation may be that non-mainstream communities are seen to have their own festivals - these are called NAIDOC Week, or Greek Glendi, or Chinese New Year. It is nevertheless just as much a failure of understanding for the community to neglect non-British heritage as it previously was to neglect, say, 20<sup>th</sup> century architecture or industrial and archaeological sites.

### **IS THE COMMUNITY UNDERSTANDING REASONABLE OR SUSTAINABLE?**

In the heritage context “reasonable” may be defined as an understanding which is inclusive, informed and aware of the broader context; “sustainable” heritage views are those which are appropriate, achievable and economically viable. It seems apparent, then, that some aspects of community understanding are problematic.

An unsustainable assumption still prevalent is that “Only the best must be saved”, meaning those few structures or landscapes with value for a particular interest group, or “This local concern must take precedence”, spoken with disregard for the bigger picture. The unreason of elitism is expressed by those committed only to preserving the mansions of the upper classes or the homes of famous people and as Graeme Davison notes, this prejudice persists in surprising quarters.

*Even the locals, who may have absorbed something of the deferential culture of the National Trust, would usually sooner preserve a local squatter’s homestead than the soldier settlers’ cottages and derelict mining sites created by their own forebears.*<sup>14</sup>

Cultural limitations lead to the misunderstanding that heritage value adheres only to the culture of “people like us”. The Heritage Week example demonstrates enthusiasm for many diverse elements of (mostly) British heritage, but organisers are neglecting the opportunity for engagement with the under-represented communities.

Problems of understanding certainly arise when the heritage claims of different communities conflict and heritage becomes political. Uluru is a highly significant place of Aboriginal heritage, but non-Aboriginal visitors know the tourist tradition of climbing the rock. Whose heritage should prevail?<sup>15</sup> Environmental concerns for the natural heritage of the Australian Alps similarly run counter to the cultural heritage of local horsemen and cattlemen<sup>16</sup>. The Hindmarsh Island bridge dispute of 1994 involved a clash not only between commercial interests and intangible Ngarrindjeri heritage but between rival Aboriginal factions, involving the accusation that the heritage of “secret women’s business” had been fabricated in order to oppose development<sup>17</sup>. On such occasions the lack of understanding between interest groups and lack of respect for the other’s heritage is quite deliberate.

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<sup>14</sup> Davison, G & McConville, C (eds) 1991, *A Heritage handbook*, Allen & Unwin, North Sydney, p 10.

<sup>15</sup> See for example the explanatory notes at <http://www.environment.gov.au/parks/uluru/visitor-activities/do-not-climb.html>

<sup>16</sup> See for example the web site of the Mountain Cattlemens Association of Victoria, <http://www.mcav.com.au/>

<sup>17</sup> See for example Simons, M 2003, *The meeting of the waters: the Hindmarsh Island affair*, Hodder Headline, Sydney

Wilful misunderstanding or exaggeration of the problems and costs accompanying heritage status is a further complication: take for example the statement of the Reverend Michael Faragher who in July 2011 celebrated the completion of new work on All Saints church in Ainslie, Canberra, a 19<sup>th</sup> century structure moved from Sydney and re-erected in the 1950s.

*“... we have to comply with the 1868 bits and the 1958 bits. It passed through a fairly stringent development applications process and, of course, as soon as the word heritage is attached to anything, it becomes 15 times as complicated and expensive”.<sup>18</sup>*

The Reverend Faragher presumably values the historic fabric of his church and would be the first to protest against any threat to it. His exaggeration for dramatic effect is unhelpful, but not atypical.

An opposite and equally unsustainable enthusiasm would be one which wanted all heritage to be preserved. We live in a real and changing world, not an eco-museum frozen in time; furthermore, redundant buildings, landscapes or collections which are successfully preserved must somehow earn their keep. The local butter factory, courthouse or railway station has been heritage listed and preserved for posterity: excellent, but what now? Is it to become a museum, an arts centre, a retail outlet, or remain empty? And if it fails to turn a profit in its new role, who will subsidise the shortfall? “Demolition by neglect” can follow when structures are listed but not resourced, a warning given by several respondents to the 2006 Productivity Commission report.<sup>19</sup> The same applies to a natural environment: once preserved it must be maintained and managed, and that comes at a much greater cost than a coat of paint or a new damp course. As Aplin observes<sup>20</sup>, *Even if we want to keep something exactly as it is, unchanging and unused, there will be so many external forces impacting on it that management remains crucial.*

A sustainable understanding of heritage would involve listing structures or environments only in the context of a properly prepared statement of significance and ideally a management plan. These can be expensive, but deferring them creates problems for the future. Governments (and no doubt developers) dislike the unnecessary controversy and agitation which can arise when a development proposal brings issues into the open for the first time. The Productivity Commission Report of 2006 noted that the deferral of proper heritage assessments added to uncertainty and could lead to unnecessary contention.<sup>21</sup> Confusion and conflict waste resources, make proceedings difficult for all parties involved, and in the long term discourage both community support and legitimate commercial interest.

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<sup>18</sup> *The Canberra Times*, 11 July 2011.

<sup>19</sup> <http://www.pc.gov.au/projects/inquiry/heritage/docs/finalreport>, Overview, pp xxvi-xxvii.

<sup>20</sup> Aplin, GJ 2002, *Heritage: identification, conservation and management*, Oxford University Press, South Melbourne, p 27.

<sup>21</sup> <http://www.pc.gov.au/projects/inquiry/heritage/docs/finalreport>, Overview, pp xxiii-xxiv.

## HOW COULD IT BE IMPROVED?

Heath McDonald's study *Understanding Public Involvement with Australian Heritage*<sup>22</sup> argued that a local, personal connection is the key to concern with heritage. Interest in family history and genealogy is strong in Australia, and local heritage sites manage to acquire 'friends', support groups or committees to oversee their welfare. It follows that building from local and personal concerns towards a more inclusive awareness is the most promising strategy. The understanding which people gain from local research and experience can enable them to see how their special site or story contributes to the national whole, or to appreciate the heritage concerns of communities beyond their own.

Building from the local can happen in various ways: perhaps a multi-heritage program in one place, or a themed heritage program involving a number of different places. An example of the first approach can be found on the south coast of NSW:

*The Sapphire Coast in southern NSW provides a solid example of communities coming together to share their stories. ... After significant community consultation, the people of the Sapphire Coast have developed three central stories that convey their rich heritage to their community and international and domestic tourists – Killers of Eden, In the Shadow of the Mountains and Meeting of the Waters. These shared stories have become a cohesive element of the community's identity, they have refined and contributed to tourism experience and in turn enhanced the economic prosperity of the region.*<sup>23</sup>

Connecting different places in accord with a heritage theme is another promising way of building from the local to a broader understanding.

*Community awareness is raised by networking places according to heritage themes, such as transport to tell a story, for example, the Cobb and Co Heritage Trail from Bathurst to Bourke, or the Great North Road (a convict trail in New South Wales), or the Goldfields Trail in Victoria. The Queensland Heritage Trails network was established to celebrate the centenary of Federation and, with other themed trails, is part of the heritage tourism strategies that some agencies have been promoting in conjunction with their State Tourism agencies.*<sup>24</sup>

The communities in these examples have been motivated to understand their own heritage in context, a part of the larger region or the larger history.

Heritage-related publicity should do the same. Heritage is often in the news, for good reasons as well as bad, and it is important that media releases publicising heritage festivals, new heritage listings, the awarding of heritage grants or new legislation and regulation should put the news in context. When a building or site is listed the announcement should ideally show how it fits the local/State/national criteria, along with other named examples. Where a festival or special event is announced, publicity might stress the locality's cultural mix by including the contribution of two or more different communities or special interest groups. Every public statement about heritage is a chance to reinforce its diversity, value and breadth.

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<sup>22</sup> Op. cit.

<sup>23</sup> Australian Heritage Council submission to the Department of Sustainability, Environment, Water, Population and Communities, published in the Issues Paper *A Sustainable Population Strategy for Australia* in December 2010, pp 4-5. <http://www.environment.gov.au/sustainability/population/consultation/submissions/pubs/0364.pdf>

<sup>24</sup> Lennon, J 2006, "Natural and Cultural Heritage", theme commentary prepared for the Australian State of the Environment Committee 2006, Department of Environment and Heritage, Canberra, p 38.



More uniform and better publicised definitions and regulations across Commonwealth, State and local jurisdictions would also improve understanding, as would clarification of responsibilities and funding arrangements. *The Conservation of Australia's Historic Heritage Places Inquiry* report by the Productivity Commission in 2006 noted that funding information was fragmentary and split between agencies or levels of government, making it difficult to assess the effectiveness of public conservation expenditure.<sup>25</sup> The report recommended that Commonwealth, State and Territory governments should issue their agencies with heritage asset management guidelines as part of an integrated asset management framework.<sup>26</sup>

Transparency of listing processes and criteria, clear statements of significance, more readily available information about heritage places (what is listed and why; what management plans have been adopted or are in preparation; what kinds of use or development are possible) would be of benefit to all parties.

Heritage understanding could also be enhanced by public forums, perhaps using local examples to illustrate the broader picture. The excellent web site "Teaching Heritage NSW"<sup>27</sup> stresses the importance of open debate and the benefits of participative decision making. Public involvement is also readily improved by broadening the membership of consultative bodies.

What key points should be stressed when heritage is discussed at any level? Three particular messages would serve to extend and improve community understanding.

- Firstly, that Australian heritage has a breadth and variety in which the local community's interests possibly represent only a small part. Local buildings, landscapes or traditions which people cherish should be seen in the wider context which incorporates many historic periods and different cultures.
- Secondly, that the celebration of a diverse heritage contributes to national identity and social cohesion. According to the Sustainable Population Strategy: *Heritage and culture are at the heart of community identity. They define how we as a people view ourselves and our place in the world and how we define and respect each other. The engagement with heritage places, stories and cultural activities enables Australians to feel confident about their national and local identity, better understand the different cultures, races and ethnicities that have shaped communities, and face a changing future with hope and optimism.*<sup>28</sup>
- Thirdly, that heritage preservation involves economic benefit and a corresponding cost if heritage values are lost. Most communities can point to a preserved local structure, streetscape or natural environment which brings visitors to the area and influences both the time spent in their locality and its perceived attractiveness. Less well known is the fact that preserved built heritage contributes to a sustainable environment by avoiding greenhouse gas emissions<sup>29</sup>. Lost heritage similarly threatens economic loss as well as lost community or cultural benefit.

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<sup>25</sup> Productivity Commission 2006, *Conservation of Australia's Historic Heritage Places*, Report No. 37, Canberra, Overview, p xxiv.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid, p xxxiv, Recommendation 8.1.

<sup>27</sup> <http://www.teachingheritage.nsw.edu.au>

<sup>28</sup> Department of Sustainability, Environment, Water, Population and Communities, Issues Paper A Sustainable Population Strategy for Australia, Question 1: Issues.

<sup>29</sup> <http://heritageperth.com.au/your-heritage/environmental-benefits-of-conservation>

In addition to overt messages about heritage, understanding might well be assisted by a change in resource allocation. The neglected sector of intangible heritage has great potential to enrich understanding, and its support can be cost effective. A recent proposal from the President of Museums Australia<sup>30</sup>, for example, was that museums should collaborate in fostering oral history programs, perhaps of culturally diverse communities, telling the stories of why people came to Australia and what heritage they feel strongly about preserving in their new country.

Oral history, storytelling and personalised tours are inexpensive ways of strengthening awareness of intangible heritage; so too are exhibitions based not on artefacts but on community stories, photographs or statements. One current example is *Marnti Warajanga*<sup>31</sup>, about the Aboriginal people of the Pilbara and their experience of grass roots political action. Another is the National Museum of Australia's on line exhibition *Bottles from the Basin*<sup>32</sup>, in which communities from throughout the Murray Darling Basin describe how they monitor and maintain water quality, and what the local watercourse means to them.

Well researched and published family history is another attractive path to heritage awareness, and family history awards are now offered in several States to encourage their creation. On line archiving projects are also flourishing<sup>33</sup>; community groups are now preserving and publishing their records in digital format, making a new wealth of film, photographs, documents and personal stories widely available for the first time.

#### **CAN IMPROVEMENTS IN COMMUNITY UNDERSTANDING BE MEASURED?**

If understanding of heritage continues to evolve in the Australian community, it should be measurable with the help of evaluation programs. One important study took place following the "Distinctively Australian" program of 2003.

*Market research in 2004–05 evaluated the Distinctively Australian advertising campaign, which introduced the new national heritage system. Quantitative testing found that 54 per cent of Australians are interested in finding out more about Australian heritage. Interest in natural places, events and stories is highest amongst the general public in comparison with cultural and Indigenous places, events and stories. Women are consistently more likely than men to be interested in all three heritage areas, while older people are more interested than younger people, and 71 per cent of Australians support the new National Heritage List.*

*The research found evidence of a deep interest in discussing, exploring, understanding and 'creating' heritage in Australia and a desire among participants to 'feel' connected to something larger. There were strong indications that the 'stories' and the values communicated by, or associated with places (as well as places themselves) may be a powerful and productive way of exploring these ideas and issues.<sup>34</sup>*

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<sup>30</sup> Museums Australia Magazine Vol 19 (14) May 2011, pp 9-10.

<sup>31</sup> See <http://moadoph.gov.au/exhibitions/online/marnti-warajanga/>

<sup>32</sup> See [http://www.nma.gov.au/exhibitions/community/bottles\\_from\\_the\\_basin/](http://www.nma.gov.au/exhibitions/community/bottles_from_the_basin/)

<sup>33</sup> See examples listed in Australian Heritage Council submission to the Department of Sustainability, Environment, Water, Population and Communities, published in the Issues Paper *A Sustainable Population Strategy for Australia* in December 2010, p 4.

<sup>34</sup> Lennon, J 2006, "Natural and Cultural Heritage" theme commentary, op. cit., p 38. Survey results are also listed at <http://www.environment.gov.au/soe/2006/publications/drs/indicator/442/index.html>

These conclusions are very promising but the study should be repeated, perhaps following a similar publicity campaign for a new Australian Heritage Strategy.

Another study conducted in 2006 for the Heritage Chairs and Officials of Australia and New Zealand<sup>35</sup> showed very positive attitudes about historic heritage. Of the agree/disagree statements, the highest Agree/Strongly Agree score went to three key statements:

- It is important to educate children about heritage (96.9%)
- It is important to protect heritage places even though I may never visit them (93.4%)
- Heritage is part of Australia's identity (92.3%).<sup>36</sup>

The real importance of such surveys lies in their continuing over time. Changes in understanding may happen very slowly; fluctuations may be attributable to major events, news stories or publicity campaigns of the day, but the longer the study continues, the more useful the measure of public understanding and its evolution.

On-line surveys are relatively inexpensive to operate, and have the potential to reach very large sample bases. It would be possible, for example, to ask respondents to rate the importance on a scale of 1 to 10 of different kinds of Australian heritage: buildings, environments, maritime, Indigenous, etc. Their understanding of the criteria for heritage significance, the procedures involved in heritage preservation or their involvement in different kinds of heritage activity could also be measured. Changes over time would help to demonstrate shifts in public understanding and perhaps attribute their cause.

#### **SUMMARY: KEY ISSUES TO BE CONSIDERED IN AN AUSTRALIAN HERITAGE STRATEGY.**

An Australian Heritage Strategy should address the need for uniform definitions and regulations across levels of government and between States and Territories, to avoid the current confusion of multiple lists. This issue has arisen in numerous previous studies, a typical statement being: *Better integration of the new arrangements with state and territory processes across all areas of heritage conservation still remains the most active requirement.*<sup>37</sup>

The current legislative separation of natural and cultural heritage and Indigenous and non-Indigenous heritage is also a barrier to understanding, efficiency and effectiveness. A Heritage Strategy should integrate all sectors.

A new Heritage Strategy should build on the promotional opportunities offered by heritage listings, grants, or new legislation to stress the diversity and value of heritage, and encourage public perception of inclusiveness as a key factor in heritage decision making.

Support of heritage festivals, local histories, oral histories, family histories, storytelling and tours should be enhanced in recognition of the fact that personal or local connection is the key to community interest and a broader understanding of heritage.

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<sup>35</sup> Allen Consulting Group 2005, *Valuing the Priceless: The Value of Historic Heritage in Australia*, Research Report 2.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid, p viii.

<sup>37</sup> Lennon, J 2006, "Natural and Cultural Heritage" theme commentary, op. cit., p 42.

Internet-based sharing of heritage information, projects and issues is a cost effective means of increasing public awareness and participation, and one increasingly accessible to the community. Cultural institutions, archives and heritage agencies already put projects online; these should be extended and networked.

The teaching of heritage concepts and issues remains a priority. Websites such as the excellent NSW model “Teaching Heritage” (<http://www.teachingheritage.nsw.edu.au>) could serve as a model for other local or national sites.

A new Australian Heritage Strategy should incorporate an evaluation plan in order to measure community awareness, and track changes in understanding of heritage issues over time.

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## **WEB RESOURCES**

Australian Capital Territory Heritage  
<http://www.cmd.act.gov.au/heritage>

Bush Heritage Australia  
<http://www.bushheritage.org.au>

Heritage Council of Western Australia  
<http://www.heritage.wa.gov.au/>

Heritage Perth Inc.  
<http://heritageperth.com.au>

Heritage Tasmania  
<http://www.heritage.tas.gov.au>

Heritage Victoria  
<http://www.dpcd.vic.gov.au/heritage>

Friends of Cultural Heritage Preservation  
<http://www.culturalheritage.net.au>

Department of Sustainability, Environment, Water, Population and Communities, Heritage Division  
<http://www.environment.gov.au/heritage>

Northern Territory Heritage  
<http://www.nt.gov.au/nreta/heritage>

New South Wales Heritage Branch  
<http://www.heritage.nsw.gov.au>

Queensland Heritage Council  
<http://www.qldheritage.org.au>

South Australian Heritage Council  
<http://www.environment.sa.gov.au/Heritage>

Teaching Heritage (NSW)  
<http://www.teachingheritage.nsw.edu.au>