

## The natural and cultural heritage of Australia

Australia's heritage of places and structures is known as the National Estate. The National Estate includes natural areas, Indigenous sites of cultural significance and historic places of all kinds. The first ever national survey of Australia's heritage of natural, Indigenous and historic places was called the Committee of Inquiry into the National Estate. Its landmark report described the term National Estate as "a brilliant compression of much in little." The national statutory body that came into being in 1975 following this Inquiry was called the Australian Heritage Commission. The principal role of the Commission was to create a Register of the National Estate. Over the subsequent 30 years, the Register, now known as the Australian Heritage Database, has come to include some 20,000 places of outstanding individual significance, together with places representative of Australia's natural and cultural history. It is the most significant national inventory of natural and cultural places in Australia. It includes the most majestic natural areas such as the Prince Regent and Kimberley Area with its deep cut gorges and the giant fossilised coral reef of the Limestone ranges and the humblest cottages such as those in Arthur's Circus in Hobart.

Australia's heritage also includes objects and artefacts. Some are to be found in the collections of art galleries, museums of prehistory, historical museums and libraries but a very large number are also distributed widely across the Australian community.

Together this heritage of places and objects helps us to understand what is significant about the land we occupy and the nature of human settlement upon it. It is a priceless inheritance that is available for our present enjoyment. It is our duty to hand it down intact to future generations.

### What does this heritage comprise and why should we preserve it?

*Australia's natural heritage.* Australia's natural heritage comprises many different categories of sites. They include:

- Rainforests (e.g., Daintree National Park);
- Temperate forests (e.g., the Blue Mountains);
- Heath, shrublands, grasslands, herblands (e.g., the Wimmera, Mallee and south-western Australia);
- Plains (e.g., the Simpson Desert National Park);
- Mountains, hills and ridges (e.g., the Flinders Ranges);
- Aeolian landforms (e.g., Lake Mungo);
- River systems and lakes (e.g., Barron Falls in Queensland and the Macquarie Marshes in New South Wales);
- Bays, estuaries and marine formations (e.g., Port Campbell National Park in Victoria);
- Islands (e.g., Fraser Island in Queensland);
- Volcanic sites (e.g., Mt Gambier in South Australia);
- Meteor impact sites (e.g., Wolf Creek in the Kimberleys);
- Glaciers (e.g., Table Mountain in Tasmania);
- Endangered species habitats (e.g., the Tanami Wildlife Sanctuary in the Northern Territory);
- Caves (e.g., Wombeyan Cave Reserve in New South Wales); and
- Geological monuments (e.g., Bungonia Gorge in New South Wales).

Many of these natural sites also contain cultural values of significance to Indigenous people. There are many reasons for preserving this natural heritage. The most striking, the most scientifically valuable and the most beautiful areas must be conserved for future generations and for the world as outstanding examples of Australia's distinctive environment.

Representative examples of each of our various ecosystems should be conserved. They should include plant communities and the breeding grounds and habitats of all indigenous fauna.

# THE AUSTRALIAN COLLABORATION

The preservation of genetic diversity must be ensured for:

- the health and stability of natural and near natural systems;
- the maintenance of essential life support systems;
- the sustainable utilisation of living resources and the ecosystems in which they are found; and
- the as yet unknown and untapped agricultural, pharmaceutical, industrial and other potentials of natural materials.

Our finest natural areas should also be preserved for the great recreational opportunities they offer, including relaxation, aesthetic satisfaction and spiritual inspiration. There are also human-affected landscapes of great beauty and interest that should be preserved for the enjoyment of all people.

## Australia's cultural environment.

Australia's Indigenous Estate includes:

- Places that have the potential for the study of pre-history (e.g., Mt William axe quarry and Lake Condah in Victoria);
- Sites illustrating living patterns (e.g., the Ballina middens in New South Wales);
- Sites involving creative activities (paintings, engravings and carved trees) (e.g., the Dampier Art site and Burrup Peninsula in Western Australia);
- Contact sites relating to the history of early relationships between Aboriginal people and Europeans (e.g., Hermannsburg mission station in the Northern Territory); and
- Traditional (living, mythological or sacred) sites of significant to Aboriginal people.

Australia's Historic Estate includes:

- Historic areas such (e.g., North Adelaide);
- Historic towns (e.g., Beechworth in Victoria);
- Precincts and groups of buildings (e.g., St Vincent Place in Melbourne);
- Industrial sites (e.g., Ravenswood in Queensland);
- Great and small houses (e.g., Clarendon Homestead in Tasmania);

- Administrative, commercial and religious buildings (e.g., Francis Greenway's buildings in Sydney); and
- Gardens (e.g., the Royal Botanic Gardens in Melbourne).

There are powerful reasons for preserving the best and the most representative examples of all these components of Australia's Indigenous and Historic Estate.

The most ancient archaeological sites provide vital evidence of the existence and life-ways of modern humans and of the settlement of the Australian continent at a date earlier than 40,000 years ago. Archaeological sites illustrate the richness of early Aboriginal society in Australia and its significance compared to other centres of early human development such as the Middle East.

Aboriginal rock engravings and rock art provide important evidence of Aboriginal culture and creativity. They also depict record historical events such as the arrival of Macassan praus and European ships. They provide environmental data of considerable interest to science. An example is the paintings of thylacines (Tasmanian tigers) in Arnhem Land in the Northern Territory.

Contact sites where Aboriginal and white people met are of historical interest. Some, such as massacre sites, are of special significance to Indigenous people. Many other places have sacred or other symbolic significance for Aboriginal people.

Historic areas, structures and places provide tangible evidence of Australia's immediate past. They are the cultural roots of contemporary society. Historic places include both the most imaginative artistic representations of other times and also places that typify life and work in Australia over the last 200 years. Historic buildings and areas from other eras provide us with a diversity of building forms which give great character to our cities and countryside.

*Historic artefacts and objects.* Indigenous artefacts and objects include very early stone tools, weapons, objects used for daily living, traditional dress, woven material and funerary material. Historic objects and artefacts include great works of art, books, farm and other tools and machinery, and objects reflecting the daily lives of Australians of all walks of life.

Historic artefacts and objects need to be preserved for the same reasons that prehistoric and historic places need to be preserved. Some are illustrative of ancient Indigenous culture; some represent the finest expressions of national

creativity; and some are essential evidence of the history of Australian society.

Once destroyed, these places and objects can never be replaced.

## The protection of Australia's heritage

The Australian Constitution does not directly permit the Commonwealth to legislate in respect of sites other than those that fall within its own jurisdiction. But, where Australia enters into international agreements, the Commonwealth can legislate to protect sites of certain categories. Australia is a signatory to two important conventions: the Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage and the United Nations Convention on Biological Diversity. A further extension of the Commonwealth's powers stemmed from the 1967 constitutional referendum related to Aboriginal people.

When the Australian Heritage Commission was replaced by the Australian Heritage Council in 2003, the protective powers of the Commonwealth were extended to include protection for sites of biodiversity and of Indigenous significance. Two new lists were also established: the National Heritage List and the Commonwealth Heritage List. At the same time the powers of the Council were significantly diminished.

The first new list, the National Heritage List, includes places of national significance with values that have *outstanding heritage value to the nation*. The Australian Heritage Council makes an assessment of all nominations which is passed on to the Minister who makes the final decision to list or not to list. Actions that might have a significant impact on the heritage values of a listed place trigger assessment under the *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act*. A significant criticism of the National Heritage List is that only a very small number of places have so far been listed and most of those listed are government owned. (By June 2009 only 77 places had been listed).

The second new list, the Commonwealth Heritage List, contains properties of heritage value that are located on Commonwealth owned land or controlled by the Commonwealth. The Australian Government is able to provide strict conservation protection of these places.

The third national list remains the Register of the National Estate, now called the Australian Heritage Database. The protection offered for places on the Register is limited but

some authorities around Australia include places on the Register in planning schemes. The Register is also a significant inventory of places of conservation value across Australia and thus plays an important educational role. The Register will change into a non-statutory data base in five years time.

Protection offered for heritage sites within the states and territories takes many different forms. Natural areas are protected in National Parks, nature reserves and the like. There is legislation across Australia protecting places of prehistoric or Indigenous significance. Every state and territory now has some form of heritage legislation protecting historic buildings and sites. Historic areas and towns are largely protected in planning schemes.

The main form of protection offered for objects of heritage and artistic significance is in museum, art gallery and library collections. Every state and territory has its own art gallery and library (including significant Australian collections) and there are now museums of anthropology (including Australian material) and museums of Australian history in most federal and state jurisdictions. The treatment of objects and artefacts is, however, different from that applying to heritage places since, with the possible exception of prehistoric artefacts and in some instances works of art, most of Australia's heritage of objects is in private hands and not subject to controls other than those related to the export of some moveable cultural heritage materials.

## World heritage

Australia is a signatory to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO)'s Convention for the Protection of the World Natural and Cultural Heritage. UNESCO's World Heritage Centre states that: "Our cultural and natural heritage are both irreplaceable sources of life and inspiration. Places as unique and diverse as the wilds of East Africa's Serengeti, the Pyramids of Egypt, the Great Barrier Reef in Australia and the Baroque cathedrals of Latin America make up our world's heritage. What makes the concept of World Heritage exceptional is its universal application. World Heritage sites belong to all the peoples of the world, irrespective of the territory on which they are located."

At June 2008, there were 878 properties on the World Heritage List: 679 cultural, 174 natural and 25 mixed from 145 countries. Australia has 17 properties listed. Most are areas of universal natural significance such as the Great

# THE AUSTRALIAN COLLABORATION

Barrier Reef, the Tasmanian Wilderness Area, Lord Howe Island and Shark Bay. There are, however, some properties of universal cultural value. The most important are Kakadu National Park (also a World Heritage natural area) and Willandra Lakes, both of which contain evidence of very early human occupation of the Australian continent. There are also two sites of universal historical significance, the Royal Exhibition Building in Melbourne and the Sydney Opera House. Descriptions of and statements of significance of all world heritage listings including Australian listings are available on the UNESCO World Heritage website (see below).

## Non-government bodies

Non-government bodies have been and remain of great significance to the protection of Australia's National Estate. The most important national environmental bodies are the Australian Conservation Foundation and the Wilderness Society. There are Conservation Councils within the states representing the myriad of smaller environmental bodies. Also of long standing significance are the National Parks Associations. Some bodies such as The Bush Heritage Fund raise money through donations to purchase and manage lands of conservation value.

In addition to these Australian bodies, major international bodies also have active branches in Australia. Among the most prominent are the World Wildlife Fund (WWF), Greenpeace and Friends of the Earth.

The National Trusts have played an important role in fostering the protection of cultural sites. There are National Trusts in every state and territory and an Australian Council of National Trusts in Canberra. Most Trusts are incorporated by statute although they operate independently of government. The Trusts are the owners and managers of many significant buildings across Australia. Their other very significant role has been the classification and listing of historic sites, structures and gardens. While these lists offer no protection in themselves, they have had a major influence on the formal listings of historic properties on government registers.

The most important international cultural heritage body has been Australia ICOMOS (associated with the International Council on Monuments and Sites). It has focussed on the development of codes of practice and improvement in professional standards. Of particular note has been Australia ICOMOS's Burra Charter. The Burra Charter provides

guidance for the conservation and management of places of cultural significance.

Non-government organisations have not played quite such an active role in the protection of objects and artefacts. There are nevertheless important bodies such as historical and library associations across Australia.

## Useful sources

*Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999*: <http://www.environment.gov.au/epbc/index.html>  
This Act sets out Australia's national heritage conservation regime.

The Australian Heritage Council: <http://www.ahc.gov.au/>  
This site provides a full description of the role of the Council and the Council's membership and activities.

The Australian Council of National Trusts:  
<http://www.cultureandrecreation.gov.au/wsd/2028.htm>  
The Australian Council of National Trusts is the peak body of the National Trust movement in Australia. The site has links to the eight state and territory trusts and overseas National Trusts.

Productivity Commission, (2006), *Conservation of Australia's Historic Heritage Places*, Productivity Commission, Canberra. This report provides a very useful overview of the conservation of historic properties across Australia. The report is also available online at the Commission's website at [www.pc.gov.au](http://www.pc.gov.au)

The Australian Heritage Database  
The Australian Heritage Database, previously the Register of the National Estate, contains information about more than 20,000 natural, historic and Indigenous places in Australia.  
<http://www.environment.gov.au/cgi-bin/ahdb/search.pl>

The World Heritage Convention: <http://whc.unesco.org/en/conventiontext/>  
This website provides full information about the Convention, including lists of natural and cultural properties on the World Heritage List.

## Author

This fact sheet was written by David Yencken, Professor Emeritus The University of Melbourne and former Chair of the Australian Heritage Commission. Last revised July 2009.