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2004 Port Arthur Conference Report and Abstracts

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CONFERENCE REPORT
Loving it to Death: Sustainable Tourism at Historic Places

PORT ARTHUR HISTORIC SITE 25-28 NOVEMBER 2004

On November 25-28 the Port Arthur Historic Site was the venue for the Australia ICOMOS national conference for 2004. The conference was organised by the Port Arthur Historic Site Management Authority in association with Australia ICOMOS, Tourism Tasmania and the University of Tasmania Sustainable Tourism Cooperative Research Centre.

Cultural heritage tourism is not a modern invention, but with increased numbers of visitors also comes increased pressures, not only as wear and tear on fragile fabric but also in terms of the visitor experience. Queues of irritable tourists at places such as the Acropolis in Athens or the Mogao Grottoes in China do not contribute to a qualitative visitor experience. Moreover, their very fabric is threatened by the impact of literally hundreds of thousands (in some case millions) of feet and hands per year, not to mention the peripheral impact of the carparks, cafes, toilets and “get your photograph taken wearing funny clothes” businesses that have proliferated at many historic sites. The organisers were concerned that there were not many opportunities for dialogue between the diverse participants involved in the cultural heritage tourism industry, hence the decision to organise the conference.

The title chosen for the event was ***Loving it to Death: Sustainable Tourism at Historic Places***, and the intended focus was an examination the issues involved in promoting, managing and sustaining cultural tourism at places of cultural significance. It was hoped that conference would provide a forum for a dialogue between participants from the cultural tourism industry, from tourism operators, promoters and planners, to archaeologists, historians and interpreters. It was intended that the presentations would address a diverse range of topics relating to issues such as conserving cultural value, changing visitor trends and expectations, managing the impacts on fabric, and how to pay for it all.

Port Arthur is a superbly picturesque place which (with some irony) was created out of 18th and 19th Century European attitudes to crime, punishment, social engineering and colonial expansion a “hell on earth” for its first involuntary visitors. However, in its current manifestation as an internationally recognised 21st century tourism destination it is required to manage the same tensions between conservation and exploitation that afflict other historic sites.

The President of Australia ICOMOS Kristal Buckley has already provided a preliminary conference report and kindly acknowledged the efforts of the many people who worked very hard to develop and run the event, so it is not necessary to go over this again. However, it may be useful with the benefit of having had four weeks to polish up the 20/20 hindsight to review the outcomes of the event (and thanks to all of the delegates who obediently filled in and sent off their feedback forms):

The basic statistics

Over 160 delegates registered and attended the conference. They heard a total of 5 keynote papers and 42 papers in parallel sessions, plus the summary and closing session on Saturday afternoon chaired by Dr. Barry Jones. The capacity of the plenary session venue (the octagonal hall of the former Port Arthur Asylum) is 170 so we were very pleased with the attendance.

Delegates came primarily from mainland Australia, with all states represented except for the Northern Territory. We also welcomed delegates from the USA, South Africa, Russia, Hong Kong, the United Kingdom, Hawaii and Norfolk Island. The effort required to travel to Port Arthur from such remote parts of the globe was greatly appreciated (we were somewhat amused though by one inquiry about the availability of direct international flights from Asia to Port Arthur!).

Of the 160+ delegates who attended the conference, 51 were members of Australia ICOMOS. Although a little disappointed that more icomites did not attend, we were gratified to be able to attract so many others with an interest in the subject and a willingness to participate in the dialogue.

Over 60 delegates also attended the Sunday morning workshop sponsored by Tourism Tasmania, ***Creating Sustainable Businesses in Cultural Heritage Tourism***.

The final accounting is still under way, but it appears that we have managed to make a modest profit out of the exercise. In any case, Port Arthur has given an undertaking to sponsor a special conference edition of *Historic Environment* in mid 2005 (more about this later).

The papers

Generally the responses to the keynote papers were very positive (44% of responses rated them as excellent, 48% as good), and the presentation given by Richard Engelhardt of UNESCO was particularly well received.

The parallel session papers were less consistent, (62% were rated good, 26% average), but responses were generally favourable about the scope and quality of papers. Comments that some of the papers "were a bit dry" or that they "presented nothing new" were made in some responses.

The vexed question of parallel sessions featured in quite a number of responses. While some delegates complained about having to make choices and the disruption caused by those leaving one session and joining another, others (or in some cases the same respondents) appreciated the range of papers that were available as a result of the structure. The decision by the organisers to use a parallel session structure was primarily determined by the capacity of the venue to have had 160+ delegates crowded into the Octagonal Hall for a whole day was not conscionable, especially with the warm weather that prevailed throughout the conference.

Moreover, many organisations are reluctant to fund attendance at conferences (especially by academics) where the staff member is not presenting a paper. The feedback from respondents indicated that 63% were employer-funded, so this certainly a factor.

There is obviously no right answer here, although some respondents did suggest more workshops or one-hour plenary sessions to allow delegates to give a number of short presentations followed by question and answer opportunities for the audience. Something to consider for future ICOMOS conferences?

A number of respondents commented on the lack of a conference resolution to finish the event. Others felt that the summary and closing session did not produce the expected interchange of views and impressions that can leave delegates involved and stimulated at the end of the event (a feeling shared by the organisers). It had been intended that the invited short presentations by

keynote speakers would then open up a discussion involving the other delegates, and it was apparent that many were busily preparing questions and comments in anticipation of this. Regrettably, the time allowed was simply not enough to allow for an open discussion, and so many delegates were left somewhat unfulfilled. Something else to consider for future ICOMOS conferences.

What worked and what didn't?

There were a few glitches throughout the event, and these were dutifully remarked upon by respondents. The most common complaints (other than those relating to the parallel sessions) related to the standard of accommodation and problems with coach transfers. Nevertheless, most respondents favourably rated their accommodation (29% excellent, 41% good and 22% fair) and similar for coach transfers (55% good, 17% fair and 14% poor), with quite a number expressing their appreciation of the friendliness and efforts of the coach drivers under difficult circumstances.

The lack of options for meals (especially breakfast and dinner) was also the subject of a number of comments by the respondents, and the Conference Dinner was felt by some to have been of an average standard only (48%). On the other hand, the Gourmet Barbecue at the *Cascades* was certainly a social highpoint for the majority of respondents (74% excellent and 26% good). We should have added the weather and the moon on the water as a separate rating category!

Organising a conference in a rural location such as Port Arthur does present special logistical problems, and many delegates are unaware of the lack of amenities and choice that one would expect were the conference held in Sydney, Melbourne or Hobart. The organisers do express their regrets that there were a few problems with this aspect of the organisation, but were reassured by the good grace and enthusiasm with which delegates bore these minor irritations. Thank you all.

Was it worth it?

The ultimate question for any such initiative is "was it worth it?" The feedback from delegates is rather diverse but there are some consistent messages. *In terms of overall rating for the conference, the response from respondents was overwhelmingly positive, with 52% rating the event as excellent, and 45% as good. Comments such as "the best ICOMOS conference I've been to" and "the best conference I have attended for years" were consistent, notwithstanding that a small number of delegates either did not enjoy the conference at all or were disappointed with aspects of the event (especially accommodation, transport and catering).*

A number of respondents expressed disappointment that the "hands on" tourism industry was not better represented at the conference, a response shared by the organisers. The intention had always been to bring together as diverse a range of participants of those involved in the cultural heritage tourism industry as possible, and to generate a robust debate about the means of reconciling conflicting values and objectives. Although presenters such as Simon McArthur made a stimulating contribution to the scope of presentations, a greater representation from the industry would have added a bit more spark to the proceedings. On the other hand, some delegates expressed outrage about the views expressed by some from the dollars and cents end of the cultural heritage tourism spectrum, so there you go...

So was it worth it? The answer can only be an emphatic yes, but having started the process we need to continue. The tourism industry is not just owners, operators and entrepreneurs - it is also those of us that research, dig up, maintain, interpret, manage and source funds for places that attract visitors that tell us something about our own history or that of someone else. As long as we are locked within our own specialised areas of expertise or interest we cannot reconcile with the other world views with which we must engage to achieve sustainable and viable outcomes for our sacred places.

So more conferences (organised by others of course), workshops, seminars, articles and publications please!

What happens next?

Delegates who presented papers at the ***Loving it to Death: Sustainable Tourism at Historic Places*** conference will be contacted and invited to present a full paper for possible publication in a special conference edition of *Historic Environment*. The submitted papers will be reviewed and refereed by the HE editorial committee and those selected will be published in Vol.19.1 (planned for around September 2005).

It is also proposed, with the permission of the authors, to place all submitted papers on either the conference website or the website of Australia ICOMOS (or both). In the meantime for those members who were unable to be in Port Arthur last month I have attached the file of abstracts presented at the conference along with the conference programme.

Finally best wishes to Dr. Tim Hubbard and his organising committee for the next ICOMOS annual conference, to be held in Melbourne in November 2005.

PETER ROMEY

Convenor

Loving it to Death Conference

If you would like to suggest an event, story, course etc for the Australia ICOMOS E-Mail News or submit an article, send an e-mail to the Australia ICOMOS Secretariat at: austicomos@deakin.edu.au

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