CONFLICTS BETWEEN OLD AND NEW:
TRADITIONAL OWNERS AND SITE MANAGERS IN AUSTRALIA

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Aboriginal occupation of Australia is known to date back at least 40,000 years. Aboriginal culture was isolated from other cultural developments during most of that time until European settlement just 200 years ago. Physical evidence of the past may consist of simple scatters of stone artefacts, elaborate engineering systems such as stone fish-traps which extend for miles, ceremonial stone and earthen circles or simple huts. Rock-art in various forms - paintings, stencils and engravings, is considered amongst the finest in the world.

Such sites are found throughout Australia and are variously protected under federal and state legislation. Many sites are now the focus of increasing visitation, including tourists from overseas. There is also an growing awareness by Aboriginal people that their culture is not in their control. Managers of Aboriginal sites, generally state heritage bodies, today find themselves in a conflict between increasing tourism, preservation of the sites, and a wish for cultural autonomy and control on the part of many Aborigines.

The conflict is not just a matter of "who owns the past", but what sort of past is it? White perceptions of archaeological sites are not the same as the understanding Aboriginal people have of such places. A site's significance to an archaeologist may be its research potential; to many Aboriginal people some archaeological sites may not have been particularly important traditionally, but are now a focus for their emergent cultural pride and drive for political power and land rights. Such differences of perception and significance are now a common feature of the management of Aboriginal heritage sites in Australia (Sullivan, 1983 and 1985). In the past Aboriginal attitudes to sites was not known; it was not expressed nor was it a factor which was considered when making conservation and interpretation decisions. Now white site managers are perforce having to take these views into account and include this ethnic, social and symbolic importance into their decision-making.

The case studies outlined below are examples of how Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians are combining to ensure the protection and appreciation of sites by the population at large. It is also a study of how Aboriginal people, who may not yet have land rights, are taking control of what happens to their past. Some of these solutions are legislative, others are by negotiation and compromise. The three examples are taken from quite different parts of Australia, and involve Aboriginal peoples who have experienced different forms of cultural disruption from a total and long standing one in the South, to the North where groups still live a life which has direct cultural continuity from the prehistoric past to the present.

Australia, a federation of 6 States and 2 Territories, has different forms of legislation applying at different levels. There is currently 'blanket' protective legislation in each State covering Aboriginal archaeological sites, but which differs in each case. There is recent federal legislation which can be invoked by Aboriginal people alone in appeal against certain actions to sites of significance. There is also the Australian Heritage Commission Act 1975, which maintains the federal Register of the National Estate of places of aesthetic, historic, scientific, social and other importance for future generations, which includes natural, historic and Aboriginal places. But there is NO overall view that such Aboriginal sites belong to Aboriginal people and that they have a primary right to control them and decide the future of this heritage. The present federal Labor Government which first came to power in 1983 with Aboriginal land rights as part of its platform, has since backed down on this issue. In many cases, the current strong drive for control of heritage by Aborigines can
be regarded as a substitute for rights to land.

KAKADU NATIONAL PARK (World Heritage Area), NORTHERN TERRITORY

In Kakadu we have a situation where the indigenous population still lives its tradition lifestyle in an ongoing symbiosis with the surrounding environment. This includes a number of rock art sites, and sites with archaeological deposits both going back 20,000 years as well as sites of religious significance to today's population. The former are of increasing attraction and excitement to many visitors from Darwin, 140 m away and much further afield. The land belongs to the Aboriginal community, the Kakadu Land Trust holding title, which leased it in 1978 to the federal government. The Australian National Parks and Wildlife Service (ANPWS), on its behalf sees its task as twofold:

1. protecting sites of religious significance to Aboriginal people to their satisfaction - this usually means closing off all access; and
2. protecting, within the limits of our resources, the records of Aboriginal man's long occupation of the land which Kakadu's rock art and archaeological sites represent. (Gillespie, 1984)

The lease agreement also ensures the training of Aboriginal people as Park rangers and other employment of Aboriginal people, yet makes allowances for Aboriginal traditional customs which do not readily fit in with European 9-to-5 work practices.

Concentration of tourist development is occurring at two rock-art sites complexes, Ubirr and Nourlangie. These choices were made as these sites had long been the focus of uncontrolled visitor access prior to the Parks's declaration. The decision to concentrate visitation on these sites ensures that other lesser known sites are not subject to the same visitor impact. In developing management and interpretation strategies for these 2 complexes, ANPWS has consulted with the appropriate Aboriginal individuals at all stages. Aboriginal society is not hierarchical, and land and sites are held or owned through descent in custody for those people who have a relationship with that land. Thus, a number of owners or custodians of the Bunitj and Manilakarr clans have been identified. Consultation is close between cultural resources managers, archaeologists and the custodians of the site who feel they have ultimate control. As a result the preservation and presentation of the sites is able to include all types of significance from the scientific value ascribed by archaeologists and rock-art experts to the social and religious significance held by the Aboriginal people.

At the Ubirr site two main elements of tourist development were extensively discussed: the access road, and the walkway through the main Ubirr art gallery. In the case of the road, all owners were consulted as to what areas nearby had special significance. Certain places were sacred and cannot be visited by non-initiates and access roads had to be devised which did not endanger such places - earlier roads were mere tracks formed by casual and unwitting visitors. One of the difficulties with any road was that people might get out of vehicles and stray into and disturb the integrity of such sacred sites, so signs have now been placed informing people not to stop. This strategy which is working, was devised after driving the various access options with all traditional owners, as well as planning and engineering staff (Gillespie, 1983).

Devising a method to view the spectacular main Ubirr Gallery without causing damage to the site and which maintains its visual integrity as far as possible and satisfies the various concerns of the Aboriginal traditional owners, required considerable discussion and negotiation. Previous uncontrolled visitor access had resulted in damage to the lower faces of the rock walls. A wooden viewing platform had been mooted but the traditional owners rejected this scheme after discussion. An alternative, a local sandstone walkway, was
received more favourably once sketches and models were provided. Particular concern was expressed by one owner at the removal of one rock, as it was felt that permission to do this might set a dangerous precedent for interference with the landscape in a society which has strong spiritual links with natural landscape elements. It was agreed by management that the rock would stay.

Wherever possible the interpretation trails and viewing platforms in the Ubirr and Nourlangie site complexes are demountable for ready reversibility. It is well understood by the site managers that over time the traditional owners, including the next generation, may develop different perspectives as whether and how to share these sites with visitors.

LAKE CONDAH MISSION, VICTORIA

The site is located in the Western District of the state of Victoria; an area which was subjected to relatively early (1834) and very immediately widespread white settlement. The site in question is one of a series of Aboriginal Reserves which were founded in 1868 as a partial answer to the Aboriginal 'problem' to contain Aboriginal communities, yet educate them in European ways. Hundreds of Aborigines had died from disease, and deliberate killings and the dislocation of their lands and customs, but some survived. This Anglican Mission was located within an area of concentrated and populous Aboriginal activity based on harvesting eels on their way to the sea. Elaborate and hydrologically sophisticated interconnecting channels and weirs were constructed in stone at the end of a seasonably rising 'lake', with stone hut villages nearby. It is known that the people at the Mission continued to fish and hunt in the area, the government adding areas of land to the Reserve in order that they might do so.

The Reserve and Mission system varied from State to State prior to federation in 1901, but a standard practice was to separate children from families and also move people from their original lands. This latter finally happened in 1917 when the Lake Conda Mission was closed and the entire population of over 100 was moved to the far east coast of Victoria. Most of the area became privately owned farming land.

The revocation of mission and reserves lands throughout Australia is regarded by the Aboriginal people as a broken promise, understanding as they did, and do, that those lands were theirs in lieu of the vast areas taken over by European settlement. During the Reserve phase those of mixed race were asked to leave the Mission and have lived since in the nearby town. Their identification with the Mission and its ruins has always been strong and has heightened with the Australia wide resurgence of cultural pride amongst Aborigines. The Lake Conda Aboriginal Co-operative began its push to have the land restored to them in the early 1980's. This was fortunate timing as 1984-85 was the 150th anniversary of the European settlement of Victoria and funds were available for worthy projects.

In 1983, planning commenced for a project to purchase portions of the former Reserve for the development of a tourist project and Aboriginal community settlement to be managed by the Aboriginal community in conjunction with the Victorian National Parks Service. $2750,000 was allocated to this project by Victoria's 150th Anniversary Board. The planning and management of this project consisted of a committee involving representatives of the Gournditch-jmara community, the 150th Anniversary Board, the National Parks Service and Department of Premier and Cabinet. The guidance was provided by a committee of Gournditch-jmara Elders (now the Kerrup-jmara Elders Corporation). The purchase of the former "Reserve for Aborigines", including the site and ruins of the Mission buildings was finalised in February 1984.

A series of archaeological and historical investigations were carried out. There were funded by the Victorian 150th Committee and the Victoria Archaeological Survey (the State sites
authority) (Gould and Bickford, 1984; Rhodes and Stocks, 1985), to ascertain the full extent and significance of the historical cultural remains (the nearby prehistoric fish-traps and stone house having been fully documented previously). Members of the Aboriginal community participated in the excavations, and their social and cultural attitudes to the site were part of the input into the assessment and interpretation of the site's significance.

Part of the proposal was to restore and/or reconstruct certain structures. Funding for this was sought from the Community Employment Program, a federal project, which thus sought the advice of the Australian Heritage Commission, which stressed that any such conservation works should be done according to the principles of the Australia ICOMOS Burra Charter. It was advised that new interpretation structures and dormitories should be built well away out of site of the ruined Mission remains. There was also doubt expressed at the idea of a reconstruction from photographs of a Mission dwelling, as there did not appear to be sufficient documentary or archaeological evidence to support the proposal. This latter plan was shelved. The old dormitory, partially standing, has been rebuilt to become appropriately enough part of the visitor sleeping quarters.

Since 1985, the site has been run by the Aboriginal Community as a tourist complex introducing visitors to a traditional, pre-contact way of life within the precincts of the former Mission. Nearby in Lake Condah it is planned to restore the fish-traps. Discussions are taking place with Victoria State Rivers to arrange re-flooding of part of the intricate complex of channels and traps by building a levee which will permit most of the lake to remain as drained pasture land for local farmers.

Pressure has been maintained by the local Aboriginal community to gain free hold title over the area, rather than just being the managing body. Legislation to grant the Lake Condah community rights over the land was drafted by the Victorian Labour Government. It finally made a request to the federal government which has had ultimate control over Aboriginal affairs since 1967 to legislate as the Bill was being opposed by the upper house in Victoria. In May 1987, the Federal Government used the powers of the Commonwealth to step in and pass the Aboriginal Land (Lake Condah and Framlingham Forest) Bill (Victoria) in Federal Parliament. This major land rights action grants unalienable freehold title to the Kerrup-Jmara people over the area of the Mission which they had always believed was theirs.

MOOTWINGEE HISTORIC SITE, NEW SOUTH WALES

Mootwingee is a rock engraving complex, which had been managed for some years by the state Aboriginal site authority within National Parks and Wildlife Service with considerable tourist interest. It became the focus of the regional Aboriginal community's drive for autonomy and control of their past in 1983. As a result the management, protection and interpretation of the site is now taking a very different course from that marked out for it in its original management plan of 1974. The history leading to the dramatic blockade of the site by the Aboriginal Community in 1983 was presented at the First World Conference on Cultural Parks, Mese Verde, Colorado by Sharon Sullivan in 1984 (then Director, Cultural Resources Section).

Again, like Kakadu it is a site which had been subject to considerable visitation by locals prior to any official management or interpretation. Only 80 miles from the city of Broken Hill, a mining centre in the arid west of New South Wales; from the 1920's it was a popular picnic and camping spot, which also offered the extra attraction of Aboriginal engravings and paintings. The site came under the control of National Parks and Wildlife Services in 1967 when such local visitation had created certain expectations of future usage and 'ownership' by the local (white) population.

As Sullivan points out the management of the Historic Site was under revision at the time of
the blockade. There had been considerable conservation difficulties and it suffered otherwise
from visitor over-use. However, there was no proposal to re-assess the cultural significance
of the place as it had already been identified and fixed as scientifically and educationally
significant. The modern Aboriginal population's views were largely unknown and unsought,
although elders had been previously interviewed as to the traditional, or 'tribal'
significance of the site. White management was not aware of continued links with the place,
although a few Aborigines were being used as rangers and sites officers.

In August 1983, the recently formed Western Aboriginal Land Council blockaded the site. This
shock move coincided with Broken Hill's centenary celebrations. It was also a protest against
the New South Wales Land Rights legislation which had enabled the Land Council System but
which did not allow land claims of 'alienated'; or declared Crown Land such as National Parks
or Historic Sites. Nor only did the Aboriginal community blockade the site by turning away
visitors, they also proclaimed ownership with large printed signs "Mootwingee closed by the
Owners", and grafitti appeared throughout the town demanding Aboriginal rights.

This campaign, which gained considerable media attention, was not directed specifically at the
management body, NPWS. It had, however, the immediate effect of getting the Cultural
Resources Section to the negotiation table, both officially and behind the scenes, whereas
previous low-key attempts by the Aboriginal community to be involved with the site had
failed. Since then, some 4 years ago, the results of the negotiations have been positive and
the differences between local townspeople, site managers and Aboriginal community have been
largely resolved, and amicably. The initially hardline Aboriginal demands to gain title over
the site and have total control over visitor access and routine have lessened as their
inclusion in management has increased. The Aboriginal community currently accepts that it
cannot own the site under present legislation.

National Parks Wildlife Service has embarked on a deliberate campaign to include Aborigines as
seasonal workers and as trainee rangers, and the community is pleased with this
participation. Most significantly, National Parks and Wildlife Service included
representatives from the Western Lands Council in the revision of the Plan of Management
(currently about to be authorized by the State Minister responsible). The development of this
Draft took some 2 years, but Aborigines' involvement in the process allowed consensus
decisions to be reached. The community has insisted that only one site within the Historic
camp, the Snake Cave, have restricted access. This is available only upon request and only
with Aboriginal guides, which is more suitable to the sensitive, sacred significance accorded
this site by the community. But the recommendations for the engraving site, previously the
main subject of visitation, and which was suffering from major spalling and erosion are open
ended and ambiguously worded in the Draft. It states merely that the necessary management
works should be "negotiated" between the Aboriginal people and managers.

The population of Broken Hill's major worry that its favourite picnic area might be closed off
by the Aboriginal claims was appeased by the opening up of further areas as part of the
surrounding Mootwingee National Park. This includes the dramatic hand stencil gallery in the
'Amphitheatre' previously on private property and therefore inaccessible, but now agreed by
all factions to be a most suitable alternative tourist focus. (pers. comm. J. Hope, Director
Cultural Resources, NSW NPWS).

SUMMATION

The three examples presented here are all different, yet they all have in common that
Aboriginal community's wish for and achievement of control over their past; a past which is of
increasing attraction and interest to a wider public. Also, in each case the Aboriginal
perception of their past is one which varies from those bodies and individuals who previously
had a sole say in the management and presentation of such place, i.e. the archaeologists and site managers. This past exclusivity was largely a result of a prior lack of understanding and therefore interest in the Aboriginal past on the part of the population at large. Now, not only are Aboriginal communities reclaiming an interest and a role, but there is an increased awareness on the part of the wider public.

We might wish to congratulate ourselves that these case studies show that with reason and goodwill, success can be achieved. Yet the past in the form of heritage sites, is becoming more accessible to all, both logistically and in the form of wider comprehension. The media publicity gained by such events as that at Broken Hill, the inclusion of cultural heritage in the larger natural environment debates, and the efforts of such organisations as the Australian Heritage Commission to inform and educate on Australia's heritage, have all created a more involved community. It is therefore likely that the conflicts being successfully resolved now by two small interest groups, archaeologists and Aborigines, will in the future be rehashed by a wider and more diverse public. If this is not dealt with equally sensitively and creatively, it may only re-awaken the Aboriginal cry of 'cultural imperialism'. There are many perceptions of the past; how all these differences are to be maintained yet incorporated into management and interpretation without imposing irrevocable damage or compromise onto Australia's Aboriginal's heritage places is the challenge which falls to us all.

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The case studies outlined below are examples of how Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians are combining to ensure the protection and appreciation of sites by the population at large. It is also a study of how Aboriginal people are taking control of their past. Some of these solutions are legislative, others are by negotiation. The three examples are taken from quite different parts of Australia, and involve Aboriginal people who have experienced different forms and levels of cultural disruption.

The first example is in Kakadu National Park, a World Heritage Area with spectacular rock-art sites. The area is subject to large numbers of visitors from all over the world. The local Aboriginal population still lives a traditional way of life with strong links with many of these sites, as well as other places of religious significance. In order to achieve the conflicting management aims of protecting sites of sacred significance, and presenting the rock-art to visitors, the Australian National Parks and Wildlife Service, a leaseholder from the Aboriginal owners, has evolved a system of close consultation with the custodians of each site on every detail of management. A number of different custodians are involved with each site and the differing views of each must be sought. Such negotiations are protracted, but ensure that everyone is satisfied.

The second case study, far to the South, at Lake Condah Mission, concerns the local Aboriginal community which has long had its traditional lifestyle disrupted but which has maintained a strong bond with the Mission, which has become a focus for land rights. Also, located in the area are the remains of elaborate fish-traps and stone hut village, witness to a sophisticated prehistoric exploitation of resources. In this case, the community's wishes were taken up by the State government as part of the celebrations of the 150th anniversary of European settlement. The stabilisation and restoration of the Mission was funded, and the Aboriginal community has established a tourist centre at the site. Most recently the State government has bought areas of the prehistoric sites for the community and the federal government has passed legislation granting the community title to the complex of sites. The combination of Aboriginal drive for control of their past, political will, and the advice of archeological experts has allowed the project to be a success.

The third example, the Mootwingee rock engraving site, is one where the Aboriginal community resorted to strong and very public means to gain some say over the site. At a politically sensitive time, the local centenary celebrations, they blockaded the site. As a result of this dramatic action, the Aboriginal community has since been closely involved with the State management body in drafting new management plans incorporating views about access to and interpretation of certain sites in the complex. The area cannot be transferred to the Aborigines under current Land Rights legislation, but the community is pleased with its present management involvement.
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Se sabe que la ocupación aborigen de Australia existe desde hace por lo menos 40 000 años. La cultura aborigen se quedaba aislada de los demás desarrollos culturales durante la mayor parte de aquel período hasta la colonización europea hace sólo 200 años. Los indicios materiales del pasado pueden constar de sencillos esparcimientos de artefactos de piedra, trampas detalladas de pescado, círculos ceremoniales de piedra, o cobertizos sensillos. Las pinturas rupestres se consideran entre las mejores del mundo. Tales lugares se encuentran por toda Australia y están protegidos de diversos modos bajo legislación federal y estatal. Muchos lugares se están haciendo el foco de una visitación creciente. La población aborigen está cada vez más consciente de que no tiene, el mando de su cultura. Los administradores de lugares aborigen, generalmente cuerpos estatales del patrimonio, se encuentran en pugna entre la subida del turismo, la preservación de lugares arqueológicos, y un deseo de la parte de los aborígenes de conseguir la autonomía cultural. Este conflicto no es solamente un asunto de establecer quién es 'el dueño del pasado', sino de saber de quién es el pasado. La percepción europea de los lugares arqueológicos no es la misma que la comprensión que tiene el pueblo aborigen de tales lugares.

Los casos brazados abajo son ejemplos de cómo los australianos aborigen y no-aborigenes se están combinando para asegurar la protección y apreciación de lugares arqueológicos por la población en general. También es un estudio de cómo los aborígenes están asumiendo el control de su pasado. Algunas de estas soluciones son legislativas, y a otras se llega por medio de negociación. Los tres ejemplos se han tomado de muy diversas zonas de Australia, y implican a aborígenes que han sufrido distintos grados y formas de desbaratamiento cultural.

El primer ejemplo está en el Parque Nacional de Kakadú, una zona del Patrimonio Mundial con espectaculares pinturas rupestres. La región está expuesta a una gran cantidad de visitantes de todo el mundo. El pueblo aborigen local sigue llevando una vida tradicional fuertemente vinculada con muchos de estos lugares y con otros sitios de importancia religiosa. Para alcanzar las metas y objetivos administrativos - la protección de los lugares de significación sagrada y la exposición de las pinturas rupestres a los visitantes - el Servicio Nacional de Parques y Fauna de Australia, que es arrendatario de los dueños aborigen, ha desarrollado un sistema de consulta minucioso con los custodios sobre cada detalle de la administración. Varios custodios distintos están implicados en cada lugar, y se tienen que buscar las opiniones diversas de cada uno. Tales gestiones no son prolongadas, pero aseguran que todo se estén satisfechos.

El segundo ejemplo, lejos al sur, en la Misión de Lago Condah, implica a la comunidad aborigen local, cuya vida tradicional ha estado desbaratada desde hace tiempo pero que ha mantenido lazos fuertes con la Misión, haciéndose así un foco para los que luchan por los derechos de tierra. También situados en la región están los restos de trampas de pescado y de unas aldeas de casillas de piedra, testigos de un sofisticado aprovechamiento prehistórico de los recursos naturales. En este caso los deseos de la comunidad ha sido emprendidos por el gobierno estatal como parte de las celebraciones de 150 años de colonización europea de la región. La estabilización y restauración fueron financiadas, y la comunidad aborigen ha montado un centro turístico. Últimamente el gobierno estatal ha comprado algunas partes de los lugares prehistóricos para la comunidad, y el gobierno federal ha aprobado legislación que le otorga el derecho a la propiedad del complejo de lugares. La combinación del impulso aborigen para conseguir el mando de su pasado, la voluntad política, y los consejos de expertos arqueológicos, ha permitido que el proyecto sea un éxito.

El tercer ejemplo, el lugar de grabados rupestres a Mootwingee, es un sitio donde la comunidad aborigen recorrió a medios fuertes y muy públicos para lograr voz y voto en la administración del lugar. En un momento políticamente sensible, las festividades para celebrar el centenario local, bloquearon el lugar. Como resultado de esta acción dramática, la comunidad aborigen ha sido desde entonces estrechamente implicada en el cuerpo estatal en la redacción de nuevos proyectos administrativos que incorporan sus opiniones sobre el acceso a y la interpretación de ciertos lugares del complejo. Bajo la legislación de derechos de tierra en vigencia no se puede entregar la zona a los aborígenes, pero la comunidad se queda satisfecha con su grado actual de compromiso en la administración.