

Australia ICOMOS

40 Years of the World Heritage Convention

Australian National Symposium, Friday 16th November, 2012, Sydney, Aust.

On Friday 16th November 2012, ICOMOS Australia hosted a one-day symposium in Sydney, celebrating the 40th anniversary of the World Heritage Convention. The symposium continued earlier state-based forums examining the effectiveness and value of the World Heritage Convention and its role within the community.

Approximately 100 ICOMOS members from across Australia attended the event. Facilitated with aplomb by Olwen Beazley, papers were presented and the issues debated through vigorous audience participation. It was a lively day of discussion and all who attended felt that the Symposium was of value, as it allowed debate and opinion from the floor – the roving microphones were working overtime!

Three questions were asked, with an international, national or community focus.

ICOMOS International Vice-President, Kristal Buckley, commenced the debate, giving a brief history of the Convention. Kristal then asked us questions – how do we rise to the challenge of climate change, the emerging importance of cultural landscapes and the shifting regional perception of heritage as proposed in the Hoi An Protocols? Kristal proposed that the World Heritage Convention was perhaps having a mid-life crisis and that we need to give it an annual check-up to ensure its sustainable health and relevance into the future.

Four speakers addressed the first question: **“As it reaches its 40th Anniversary, is the UNESCO Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage still a convention for conservation? If it isn’t, what is it now a convention for?”**

Sheri Burke led the debate, noting that the Convention was primarily about the protection of places of Outstanding Universal Value. This has perhaps been forgotten at an international level, in the rush to populate the WH list. More time could be spent establishing a framework to manage existing places – through Conservation Management Plans, community engagement and government agreement. Fewer listed places may then become the future ‘heritage at risk’. Bruce White continued the conversation, noting that the Convention should recognise the Universal Declaration of Indigenous Rights and the idea of ‘free, prior and informed consent’ by affected indigenous communities in the listing and management of heritage sites. The local community and their cultural beliefs are intrinsic to the OUV of a heritage site and need to be considered in future conservation of such places. Anita Smith provided further debate, reflecting on the credibility of the Convention. Anita discussed the initial ‘inscription frenzy’ of World Heritage listing, which occurred so fast that OUV statements are still to be written for many sites. After the World Heritage Committee’s 1994 ‘Global Strategy’, Anita noted that focus has shifted to the Pacific and ‘New World’. Pasifika nations are struggling to prepare nominations though, as nations have competing priorities – political, environmental or economic. Duncan Marshall added to the debate, noting that World Heritage nominations take years to prepare and require specific expertise, financial resourcing and government support. Australia may have an active role in assisting other countries. We have considerable recent experience in the preparation of singular and serial WHC nominations and could provide assistance via a toolkit and training.

Sarah Titchen opened the debate on the second question:

“If we look back on the last 40 years, what has Australia contributed to the international endeavour of World Heritage? What could Australia offer the world in the next 10 years?”

Sarah gave a detailed and valuable summary of Australia’s influence on the business of the WHC – including the consideration of ‘associative cultural landscapes’, rationalisation of criteria, consideration of integrity and involvement of the community in heritage assessment and management. Greg Terrill, following the recent term of Australia on the World Heritage Committee, summarised the activity of the Commonwealth Government and the proposed future strategic direction of heritage management. Greg noted that Australia is looking to support the Pasifika region through the ‘upstreaming’ of expertise, to assist in nomination of World Heritage sites. Richard Mackay concluded with a sobering report card for Australia, referencing his 2011 State of the Environment report.

Richard highlighted that Australia needed to address climate change influences, indigenous rights, mining pressures and Tentative List inertia before its 'heritage house' is in order. Government leadership is required to promote best practice cultural heritage management.

The final question posed on the day focused on communities:

Does the World Heritage Convention support communities in their endeavour to protect their heritage? Does the Convention and its operations provide benefits for communities?

Current ICOMOS Australia President, Elizabeth Vines, opened the discussion arguing that cultural sustainability is more important than authenticity to some communities. Examples in Pingyao and Kaiping, China and Penang were used to illustrate the local perception of heritage value, where significant fabric may be less important than the on-going sustainability of a heritage place for cultural reasons. The World Heritage Convention needs to adapt over time to reflect local community views – in the case of Asia – the Hoi An Protocols. Dennis Rose provided insight into the slow progress of the Budj Bim Lava Flow site nomination in Victoria. The local landowners, who are also the local Aboriginal community, have proposed the nomination as a means of protecting their significant spiritual country. Jane Harrington suggested that a community advisory committee be established to assist in representing local views. The Port Arthur committee has enhanced community participation in the management of the site and the protection of all its heritage values. It was agreed by many that grass-roots campaigns were the most sustainable campaigns for heritage listing, proving that the community is central to the initiation of WHC nominations and management of sites post inscription.

Steve Brown summarised the day with several colourful observations, noting that we should 'never waste a good crisis'! If the World Heritage Convention is not as relevant today as it was 40 years ago, we should seize the possibilities discussed in Sydney – offer regional support, encourage community engagement and continue to have an international impact on the World Heritage stage.

The symposium finished with a discussion session, facilitated by Joan Domicelj. A number of recommendations were agreed, to assist Australia ICOMOS with progressing its work in World Heritage and to form a framework for a communication to the Australian Government.

Key Messages

World Heritage

1. Australia needs standards for best practice World Heritage management: to include monitoring and the development of indicators, evaluation and review, to provide for adaptive management processes
2. AI to urge greater leadership, engagement, resourcing and consultation on World Heritage from Commonwealth government. This to include the development of a fully populated Tentative List and the necessity to adequately resource AWHAC and AWHIN.
3. Consider an ICOMOS Tool Kit to be placed on the AI website for best practice World Heritage management: models, examples, existing guidelines, options, case studies etc.
4. AI to hold a workshop in each state to address current World Heritage sites and potential sites for tentative list (including revised nominations); address Purnululu, Wet Tropics, Fraser Island, Gondwana Rainforest etc. To be held in partnership with AIUCN.
5. Canberra to be priority for consideration for tentative list
6. AI to hold a forum to address Indigenous values, cultural landscapes and world heritage: identifying methods, processes and guidelines
7. A rights based approach to be adopted for World Heritage listing: ie free and informed consent
8. Monitoring and research programs for World Heritage sites to consider links with tourism, engagement with communities, and 'who benefits from listing?', aim to promote benefit sharing

General Issues

1. Mainstreaming – AI to engage in dialogue with membership; promote big picture debates, heritage back on the agenda; advocacy across natural/cultural values; engage with government on all aspects of heritage; reclaim sustainability debate (social, economic, environmental, cultural); establish a broader strategic framework

2. AI to encourage the Commonwealth government to sign the UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage
3. 20th Century heritage needs to be recognised as a gap
4. Ask for leadership, communication, engagement in sustainability from Commonwealth government
5. Need to resolve listing blockages on NHL – to include both public engagement and open dialogue with AHC

Michael Queale, 4 April 2013.



participants



Joan Domicelj – wrap up session