

Australia ICOMOS

Draft

Guidelines for Cultural Heritage Places Damaged by the January 2003 Bushfires in South East Australia

This document has been prepared by a number of Australia ICOMOS members in response to the damage to cultural heritage places during the recent bushfires affecting large areas of south-eastern Australia. These situations are not uncommon in Australia, and the Executive Committee has decided to circulate the draft for wider comment by the membership of Australia ICOMOS. It may be that a broadly applicable guideline document can emerge from these discussions.

Please send comments to: Australia ICOMOS Secretariat, c/- Faculty of Arts, Deakin University, 221 Burwood Highway, Burwood VIC 3125.

Email: austicomos@deakin.edu.au.

Challenges in managing heritage places affected by recent bushfires

- *Many of the recognised cultural heritage sites that have been affected are not in heritage registers or have not been recently assessed for heritage values. As well, existing records may be out-of-date.*
- *Impacted cultural heritage places in urban/rural contexts will include: houses, farms, rural homesteads, farm buildings plant and equipment, gardens, fences, research complexes, bridges and cultural landscapes as well as important government facilities.*
- *Impacted cultural heritage places in parks, reserves and forests will include: scenic and cultural landscapes, views, plantations and arboreta, historic rural complexes including farm buildings, homesteads, sheds, trees and orchards, Aboriginal places, bridges, mine structures, huts, fences, roads, tracks, scientific sites, hydro-electric scheme structures, lodges, guest houses and lookout structures. Many such places are associated with social cultural values. As well, visitor facilities, interpretation structures, works structures and several groups of government housing were destroyed.*

The activities and management considerations likely to require attention in this context can be divided into phases which should be considered wherever possible.¹

Phase 1

Secure and Develop suitable Management Systems for Damaged Sites

- Liaise with Emergency Services, owners and management agencies to **secure** the site and manage any perceived imminent threat such as unstable structures and trees. In particular give attention to:

¹ These approaches should also be linked with strategies and actions for risk preparedness.

- Protecting the site(s) from persons hunting for remnants and souvenirs
- Avoiding demolition of any structures until heritage assessments are complete.

Note: loss of significant fabric and early demolition may result in inaccurate reconstruction because it was not recorded, inability to re-use significant fabric in any reconstruction, and for future interpretation of the place and its history.

Consultation with stakeholders and preliminary planning

- Be aware of sensitivities associated that could be associated with the site, such as loss of homes, property, pets, life and income.
- Analysis of previous disasters has indicated a tendency, albeit well meaning, for the establishment of sometimes competing and often confusing management arrangements. Therefore, establish a suitable administrative structure to cater for the views and interests of all stakeholders. A suitable administrative structure could include responsible public agency officials, disaster/emergency agencies, special technical taskforces, property owners and occupiers, staff of an affected facility and where heritage values are affected, such as the responsible heritage agency, as well as any other stakeholder.
- Encourage the safe keeping of all fire information memorabilia, such as press articles, video footage, photographs at all stages of the fires, and undertake an oral history program to record people's personal experiences.
Note: this material is important for future interpretation and memorials which are necessary for helping people to deal with the trauma of the event.
- Liaise with the appointed fire recovery team to gain permission to undertake a coordinated assessment and stabilization of the site, when allowed into the area.
- Develop a sound site recording and assessment pro-forma for use in the field. Prepare a recording system for salvaged remnants (using standard, systematic archaeological techniques). Provide containers, labels etc. for salvaged material. Organise a repository for salvaged material. Identify and conserve architectural elements such as window and door furniture and other built in or loose furniture and fittings.
- If hazardous material, such as asbestos, toxins or unstable structures are known to be present at the site, make provision for special requirements such as hard hats, protective clothing, masks etc which will need to be of an appropriate standard.
- Where multiple sites are affected, develop a program for assessment of possible affected places and a priority list of places for assessment. Ensure that the damage to all aspects of a site is assessed, including outbuildings, fences and landscape settings.

Phase 2

Undertake Suitable Surveys and Assessments of the Affected Place

- Ensure adequate information on the recovery plans are made available to all stakeholders.
- Allocate appropriate resources to undertake site assessments, including the assessment of the reconstruction, adaptation, reuse and ruin stabilisation potential of the remaining fabric.
- Photographically record each place, using the NSW Heritage Information Series, Guidelines for Photographic Recording of Heritage Sites, Buildings & Structures (at: www.heritage.nsw.gov.au/docs/photog.pdf) or other approved process. Recording of the site or elements within it, appropriate to their significance may need to be considered. A guide is provided by the NSW Heritage Information Series, How to Prepare Archival Record of Heritage Items (at: www.heritage.nsw.gov.au/docs/archives.pdf).
- Assess the threat of and provide guidance for the mitigation of dangers associated with hazardous material now exposed such as asbestos and toxins, as well as, the dangerous condition of extant remains, including trees.
- Where possible, take appropriate steps to protect exposed surfaces of structures and other vulnerable fabric from weather damage.
- Prepare a recording and assessment report of the place, using standard recording sheets. The agency may have its own forms that can be used or adapted.
- Re-assess heritage values of damaged places including the landscape setting of the place.
- Identify what work needs to be done to stabilise site and mitigate immediate threats such as adequate site drainage and soil retention measures.
- Depending on extent of damage, and **if necessary** prior to demolition, salvage historic fabric and artefacts and arrange suitable storage including storing artefacts in watertight containers appropriately labelled. Store material on site if a safe secure location can be found, or in a central or regional repository for re-use, adaptation and or reconstruction (salvaged items may be reused in restoration works), or future interpretation. Prepare reports and illustrations of recovered artefacts and building elements.
- Prepare cultural landscape assessment report involving a recording of landscape features and their post fire condition.

- Prepare a master-plan for complex places such as precincts using the findings of the heritage surveys and assessments.

Phase 3

Provision of long-term conservation advice

- Review data and develop options for management measures, interpretation and recovery.
- Review the existing fire management plans for the place.
- Prepare a conservation management plan or policy for each affected place and upgrade for fire/risk management if required. These may include plans for stabilised ruins and interpretation centres.
- Involve stakeholders in recovery activities such as conservation of items and development of memorials.
- Develop a database of fire-affected sites.

When in doubt about actions refer to the *Australia ICOMOS Burra Charter 1999*.

DRAFT

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