

# AUSTRALIA

## Introduction

In Australia's last report for *Heritage at Risk* we noted the prevalence and impact of natural disasters across Australia. Sadly, the country has experienced another summer of such disasters, ranging from fires in south-eastern Australia to massive flooding in the north. We remain grateful that the impact on life has been much less than that from previous disasters, and while a loss of significant heritage values has not occurred in the more recent events, the destruction of more local and community-based values has been sorely felt.

## Issues and Threats

While we continue to recognise the threat to heritage arising from natural disasters, two important studies have been finalised since our last report and it is hence timely to review their findings and recommendations in terms of ongoing threats to Australia's cultural heritage. The first is the five-yearly Australian government publication *State of the Environment 2011*. The second is the UNESCO World Heritage Asia Pacific Second Cycle of Periodic Reporting 2010–12. Australia ICOMOS members contributed to both studies and to the final publications.

The 2011 State of the Environment (SoE) report identified the key threats to heritage (both natural and cultural) as the impact of natural and human processes and a lack of public sector resourcing. The 'at a glance summary' of risks to heritage provides the following overview:

Australia's heritage is under-resourced and at risk from both natural and human factors. Although some events, such as the removal of statutory protection, large-scale resource extraction from reserved lands and unmanaged fires, would have catastrophic impact, these are generally unlikely. However, major risks do arise from the effects of climate change, such as damage from extreme weather events, managed fires, loss of habitat and increases in invasive species. Indigenous cultural heritage is particularly at risk from loss of traditional knowledge and incremental destruction of Indigenous places. Development consent is often granted in the knowledge of site-specific heritage impact, but in the absence of adequate knowledge about the total extent of the Indigenous heritage resource. Resourcing is also a major risk factor, including limited funding, lack of incentives, neglect arising from rural population decline and the impending loss of specialist heritage trade skills. Development and resource extraction projects directly threaten the nation's heritage at both a landscape and individual site scale; the impacts are exacerbated by inadequate survey and assessment, duplicate and inconsistent statutory processes, and a perception of heritage as expendable. Lack of national leadership increases the overall risk to Australia's heritage (SoE 2011, p. 784). In the preparation of the SoE report, Australia ICOMOS had the opportunity to contribute through

a workshop session, which involved a number of members and the Executive Committee. The table below includes a number of threats to the ongoing protection of heritage that were identified in that forum.

Issue	Comment
Governance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– there is a lack of government support and leadership for heritage with no national strategy or adequate resourcing for heritage protection;</li> <li>– current decision-making powers do not reflect community attitudes;</li> <li>– failure to link individual, public and government interests;</li> <li>– jurisdictions handle cultural heritage differently;</li> <li>– the role of natural/national heritage trusts has changed over the last 30-40 years as heritage is now being managed in a different context</li> </ul>
Definition	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– there is a lack of good outcomes for heritage owing to the imperfect conceptualisation of what heritage is, in particular Indigenous heritage</li> </ul>
Planning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– systematic failure of the planning system to protect heritage;</li> <li>– there are no shared resourcing, planning or management systems in place for natural and cultural (tangible and intangible) heritage – all are competing for resources and not working together</li> </ul>
Tangible/Intangible	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– heritage institutions responsible for heritage management focus on tangible heritage;</li> <li>– there are multi-generational and multi-cultural people with knowledge and stories who do not necessarily place value on them or know how to share them, and are often not identified or captured as part of assessment surveys (especially at local government level)</li> </ul>
Economic drivers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– the scale and pressure of economic development, including urban development and mining, outweighs heritage which is perceived as being of no monetary value and expendable;</li> <li>– in planning the focus is expedience and heritage protection is reactive rather than proactive</li> </ul>

Disaster response	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– when natural disasters such as cyclones or fires occur, there is a lack of recognition that community health and wellbeing also rely on the retention and conservation of heritage places and values;</li> <li>– climate change is accelerating and its potential consequences for all types of heritage are dire</li> </ul>
Training	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– heritage concepts need better coverage in environmental management courses and other training that has crossover with heritage management;</li> <li>– conservation skills need to be incorporated into education and training for planners, architects, public and tradespeople</li> </ul>
Identification and listing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– failure between heritage industry, government and community about identifying what we want to keep and what can be preserved through interpretation and stories;</li> <li>– landscape assessment and protection is an especially challenging area</li> </ul>

It is interesting to note that many of these concerns were reflected in the broader regional study undertaken through the World Heritage Periodic Reporting for Asia and the Pacific. Australia ICOMOS again had the opportunity to contribute at a national level in a stakeholder workshop, held by the Federal department with responsibility for heritage. While in some cases there was a differing opinion as to degree of threat between Australia ICOMOS and the government representatives, it is clear that Australia's identification of threats is reinforced in the feedback from across the Asia Pacific region. Clearly this is all contained within the final report, which can be accessed readily on the UNESCO website, however it is worth highlighting a number of identified threats. Many have already been identified above and those listed below stand out as additional issues. While the Periodic Reporting process arises in the context of World Heritage properties, it was clear from the questionnaires and workshops that the implications for heritage management exist in many national entities across all heritage places and values:

- incomplete inventories (in both extent and diversity);
- inadequate tentative lists;
- inadequate legal frameworks;
- lack of management plans or ineffective/incomplete plans;
- failure to engage in effective monitoring programs;
- lack of heritage training (including traditional trades and skills training) and access to experienced people;
- need for consolidated research programs;
- inadequate involvement with local and traditional communities;
- impacts from tourism activities and visitation.

Arguably one of the strongest challenges that has been identified in the Australian context and reflected across the region relates to communication and awareness-raising at the grass roots level. The impetus for conservation and protection of heritage values can be best instilled through education programs, whether school

based or mature-age programs, and through mechanisms for information exchange, discussion, debate and learning. However, this is but one of a tool set of activities and mechanisms that need to be put into play to help reduce the threats we are facing to heritage within Australia. One of the key messages coming out of processes such as the State of Environment and Periodic Reporting is that the recommendations in the final publications are of little value unless they are acted on and reviewed in a timely, regular and proactive way. Waiting for another five or six years for the next report in these programs devalues the efforts that have gone into their creation. Australia ICOMOS proposes to initiate further discussion with relevant government and other bodies, both nationally and regionally, to ensure that this process is one of ongoing engagement.

### Case Study One: Bush Fires – Eastern Tasmania

Tasmania is the small island state located at the far south of Australia. On 4 January 2013, most of the south-eastern part of Australia experienced a heat wave with weather conditions that resulted in a number of bush fires across the country. The most devastating of these occurred in Tasmania, where for several days large bushfires burnt out of control. On 4 January, Hobart, Tasmania's capital, recorded its highest temperature since records began in 1882, reaching 41.8°C (107.2°F).

Communities in the fire-affected regions were forced to evacuate, with a particular impact on the Tasman and Forestier Peninsulas. As the fires travelled south, they forced the closure of the only road both in and out. This left people on both sides stranded, compounded on the Tasman Peninsula by the large number of visitors on a day trip to the Port Arthur Historic Site. Two of the sites in the Australian Convict Sites World Heritage property are located on the Tasman Peninsula: The Port Arthur Historic Site and the Coal Mines Historic Site. Both sites include large portions of natural bushland. The fires did not threaten the Coal Mines site, which is located on the north-western tip of the Tasman Peninsula, but reached within 10 kilometres of Port Arthur. With the road closed, the Port Arthur Historic Site was established as an evacuation centre and undertook the care of over 500 visitors, many of whom who were unable to leave for several days. The disaster was compounded by the loss of power and communications, and the historic site also acted as a refuge for members of the local community faced with food shortages and no domestic electricity supply.

The final impact of the fires in Tasmania was the destruction of over 100 properties. More than 20,000 hectares (49,000 acres) of bushland were burnt out. The impact on people's homes, properties, livestock, rural landscapes and both domestic and native wildlife was devastating. Thankfully no lives were lost, an outcome that can be credited to prompt action by emergency workers and the coastal location of much of the impacted area.

No places of major heritage significance were destroyed. However, many places that were important to the local community, including rural and township landscapes, have been lost and much of the recovery effort is now dedicated not only to the replacement of homes, sheds and fences, but also to the community's sense of place and cohesion.

Without a change in weather conditions, it is likely that the Port Arthur Historic Site would have been severely damaged. At the time the Port Arthur Historic Site Management Authority was near completion of two systems to counter such threats: a fire

suppression system that will provide the capacity to deliver water flows to all significant areas of the site, and a revised Emergency Management Plan, which has been prepared in consultation with the guidelines of the UNESCO publication *Managing Disaster Risks for World Heritage Properties* (2010). However, the somewhat sobering reality is that if the January fire had reached the historic site neither would have been of much value in the face of such a ferocious and devastating wildfire. The site managers are currently undertaking a review of threat preparedness for all three sites it manages in the Australian Convict Sites World Heritage property.

## Case Study Two: Urban Development – Old Government House and Domain, Parramatta, New South Wales

In November 2011 a major development was proposed in the immediate proximity of another site that is part of the Australian Convict Sites World Heritage property: Old Government House and Domain. Australia ICOMOS expressed its concerns at the time through processes established under the Commonwealth *Environment Protection Biodiversity and Conservation Act 1999* (EPBC Act). The matter was reviewed and a second development proposal submitted some six months later. It was disappointing that there was little in that change to mitigate any of the concerns highlighted by Australia ICOMOS. Our main concerns were:

1. It was non-compliant with the existing planning scheme, for two high-rise towers, both over the maximum building height of 80 metres, with one tower exceeding the maximum building height by 37.6 metres.
2. Parramatta is an area of early settlement in Australia and the development site is surrounded by sites of acknowledged local, state, national and World Heritage value.
3. There would be potential impact on the setting of Old Government House and Domain, Parramatta Park, which is not only of Local and State heritage significance but is included on the National Heritage List and is one of the eleven sites in the Australian Convict Sites World Heritage property.
4. The development was potentially at odds with the ICOMOS assessment report for the Australian Convict Sites, tabled at the 34th Meeting of the World Heritage Committee in Brasilia in 2010, which recommended that the Commonwealth of Australia pay attention to managing the landscape values of the sites in or close to urban areas by studying the visual impact of their current environment and any projects liable to affect those values (World Heritage Committee Meeting Decision 34COM 8B.16)
5. The 2010 Assessment report for the Listing further noted under the heading ‘Development pressures’:  
More broadly, some of the sites within the property may be threatened by the development of the property’s peripheral area and in its buffer zone, notably in terms of the landscape impact of growing urban environments... This refers in particular to the City of Sydney for Hyde Park Barracks... to Parramatta city for Old Government House...
6. As the Australian Convict Sites World Heritage Property consists of 11 individual sites, any potential negative impact on the heritage values of one site can be considered to affect the Australian Convict Sites as a single property. The implications were hence far greater reaching than the impact in this



The fires in January 2013. This photo was taken after the fire had devastated the township of Dunalley, destroying 65 buildings, and before it moved on to Sommers Bay, where another 14 homes were destroyed (photo: courtesy of Jody Steele).



Fire devastation, Tasmania, January 2013 (photo: courtesy of Jody Steele)

Old Government House, Parramatta (photo: courtesy of Kerime Danis)



instance of the identified heritage values of Old Government House and Domain.

Australia ICOMOS expressed concern that the documentation for the proposal did not adequately address the potential to negatively impact the World Heritage and National heritage values of Old Government House and Domain and recommended that the potential impact on the World Heritage and National heritage values of the site appropriately addressed and considered prior to the proposal being allowed to proceed.

Central to the control of identified National and World Heritage values under the EPBC Act is the need for Ministerial approval of an activity or 'action that has, will have or is likely to have a significant impact on certain aspects of the environment' – that is, the National or World Heritage values of identified places/properties – and his/her determination as to whether the action 'should proceed'. Despite the concerns expressed by Australia ICOMOS that there was insufficient evidence to show that heritage values would not be significantly impacted, the Minister decided that the development was not a matter of concern under the EPBC Act. Subsequent referrals under the New South Wales state planning mechanisms approved the project.

Subsequent to the approval of the development, Parramatta City Council, in partnership with the commonwealth and state government departments responsible for heritage, is preparing guidelines for assessing the impacts on heritage, including settings, for the main city area. While this is welcomed, in the case of the only World Heritage listed site in the area, it is too late and the two-tower proposal has the potential to present the exact threat to heritage values that was identified in 2010 at the time the Australian Convict Sites was added to the World Heritage List.

## References

- Department of Sustainability, Environment, Water, Population and Communities 2012, *Annual Report 2011–2012*, Commonwealth of Australia, Canberra, available at: <http://www.environment.gov.au/about/publications/annual-report/index.html>.
- State of the Environment Committee 2011, *State of the Environment 2011*, report prepared for Australian Government Minister for Sustainability, Environment, Water, Population and Communities, Commonwealth of Australia, Canberra.
- UNESCO 2010a, *Managing Disaster Risks for World Heritage*, World Heritage Centre, Paris, available at <http://whc.unesco.org/en/activities/630/>.
- UNESCO 2010b, *World Heritage Committee Meeting Decision 34COM 8B.16*.
- UNESCO 2012a, *Understanding World Heritage in Asia and the Pacific: the Second Cycle of Periodic Reporting 2010–2012*, World Heritage Papers 35, World Heritage Centre, Paris, available at: <http://whc.unesco.org/en/series/35/>.
- UNESCO 2012b, *Understanding World Heritage in Asia and the Pacific: The Second Cycle of Periodic Reporting 2010–12*, World Heritage Working Papers, No. 35, World Heritage Centre, Paris, available at: <http://whc.unesco.org/en/activities/682/>.

Jane Harrington  
Australia ICOMOS  
For further information, please contact the  
Australia ICOMOS Secretariat at  
[austicomos@deakin.edu.au](mailto:austicomos@deakin.edu.au).