Aboriginal Sites and ICOMOS Guidelines

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In this paper I was asked to consider how effectively the ICOMOS 'Guidelines for Conservation Analyses and Plans' can be applied to Aboriginal sites, and more particularly to 'examine the investigative and evaluative processes which determine the cultural significance of Aboriginal sites as a basis for conservation policy'.

I will consider the major characteristics of Aboriginal sites, which have implications for methods of assessing them and for their significance and subsequent management. This will in turn lead to an analysis of consequent problems in applying the Burra Charter and Guidelines.

VARIETY AND EXTENT

Australia has been occupied by Aborigines for more than 40,000 years. The Australian continent was profoundly altered by humans before the coming of Europeans. In this sense location and definition of Aboriginal sites is an often artificial and arbitrary process, made necessary by concepts of European land management. Josephine Flood has pointed out that sites are an integral part of the landscape and are often identified as complexes, or are preserved as part of a large land area with nature conservation values. This has implications for their management and means in fact that few plans have been written for a specific site: rather planning for Aboriginal site conservation is incorporated in other planning documents, essentially concerned with conservation of the natural environment. (J. Flood, pers. comm.)

Aboriginal sites, as defined by Europeans, are extremely numerous and very varied. More than 13,000 have been recorded in New South Wales to date with very little systematic survey.

Here is a list of site types identified in New South Wales:
Open Site
Open Midden
Shelter Site
Midden in Shelter
Art in Shelter
Midden and Art in Shelter
Art and Deposit in Shelter
Axe Grinding Grooves
Art and Axe Grinding Grooves in Shelter
Art, Deposit and Axe Grinding Grooves in Shelter
Bora, Ceremonial Grounds
Burial
Engravings
Engravings and Axe Grinding Grooves
Scarred Tree
Carved Tree
Burial and Carved Tree
Natural Mythological Site
Quarry
Fish Trap
Stone Arrangement
Mia Mia
Rock Hole/Well
Mission Cemetery or Contact Site
Engraved Channel

These sites vary greatly within each type; for example, art sites, ceremonial sites, living sites and industrial sites. Some are structures; some are elements of the landscape. Sites also vary in the nature of their significance. Some are of profound religious importance to Aborigines; others are totally prehistoric. Some have historic value or aesthetic value; others are important for research. The variety, number and range of Aboriginal sites, in time and space, is more than comparable with the historic sites, which are a result of white settlement and one would need a series of papers reflecting this variety to do the subject justice. Rather than deal with individual Aboriginal site-types therefore, this study will refer to some of their common characteristics and use these as a basis for discussion of the Guidelines. It should be emphasised however that lumping all Aboriginal sites together in this way will lead to oversimplification and will not allow a very precise or detailed level of discussion.

ABORIGINAL SITES AND CUSTODIANSHIP

White Australians, with an interest in heritage issues and in conservation have generally accepted Aboriginal sites as part of this heritage. They have made laws to protect them and have sought to integrate them into
schemes such as this one by laying claim to the Aboriginal past as part of the heritage of all Australians. Aboriginal sites, rather than European ones, are recognised as being of world importance and are considered, by the World Heritage Committee to be some of the most important such places in Australia.

This view of Aboriginal culture and, by implication, documents such as this, ignores the question of Aboriginal custodianship and the issue of what is sometimes called 'ethnic' significance. Because of the position of Australian Aborigines in Australian society as a conquered, oppressed and visibly disadvantaged group, their heritage and history takes on a special significance, and poses fundamental problems for the managers of cultural resources.

Aboriginal sites may be important to Aborigines in three ways.

Firstly, Aboriginal sites may be part of the living culture, of sacredness or significance because of their relationship to Aboriginal spiritual beliefs. In many cases this spiritual belief is the reason for their creation (for example ceremonial grounds). Where such sites are part of living culture, it is clear that their sacredness/significance to Aborigines will be their prime value and will usually overrule other values such as public or research value. In the areas of Australia last settled by Europeans, in the Northern Territory for example, this paramount value is acknowledged. The Northern Territory Sacred Sites Authority, controlled by Aborigines, has been set up to protect and manage traditional sites in accordance with Aboriginal wishes. In this circumstance, it is the Aboriginal owners, or their employees acting on their behalf, who have control of site management and who can apply the ICOMOS guidelines if they see them as appropriate. Sacred sites, part of a living religious tradition, have paramount values other than as heritage items, which may dictate actions and practices which are contrary to the ideals of the conservation movement. (For a graphic description of this conflict, see Wallace, 1977.)

Secondly, Aboriginal sites may have historic significance to Aborigines, being associated with post-contact Aboriginal history; mission stations, massacre sites and early European settlements for example. Often these
sites are significant to Europeans for other reasons. Here there can be
great cross cultural differences in determining significance. The site of
old government house in Sydney is significant to white Australians as a
symbol of the establishment of the first seat of government, order law and
a promise of expansion and growth: for Aborigines it is the first tangible
symbol of conquest. The Alice Springs overland telegraph station is
significant to Europeans because of what it means in terms of the conquest
of distance and isolation and because of the achievement of a complex and
successful remote settlement. To Aborigines it is remembered bitterly as
the place where Aboriginal children were taken from their parents.

Finally and most significantly for our present discussions; all Aboriginal
sites have contemporary significance for Aboriginal people. The vast
majority of sites in southern Australia are prehistoric. They relate to
evidence of Aboriginal occupation of the continent over 30,000 years but
they have no specific traditional significance to any particular group.
They are usually as unknown to Aborigines as to others until located and
identified by archaeological survey or other research. However, Aboriginal
society is undergoing a renaissance; a cultural revival. Aborigines in
southern Australia are asserting their Aboriginality as a matter of pride
for the first time since Europeans came. There is an immense interest by
Aborigines in their own past and their own sites which have great symbolic
value and are a means of achieving political power. Aborigines therefore
seek custodianship of sites - all sites - not just those of particular
sacredness or significance. By custodianship I mean control, at a policy
level, of site management, research and interpretation.

Ros Langford, in a paper given on behalf of the Tasmanian Aboriginal
centre, at the recent Australian Archaeological Association meeting, in
Tasmania, put the point very clearly:

The issue is control. You seek to say that as scientists you have
a right to obtain and study information of our culture. You seek
to say that because you are Australian you have a right to study
and explore our heritage because it is a heritage to be shared by
all Australians white and black. From our point of view we say
that you have come as invaders. You have tried to destroy our
culture. You have built your fortunes on the lands and bodies of
our people, and now, having said sorry, want a share in picking
over the bones of what you regard as a dead past. We say that it
is our past, our culture and heritage and it forms part of our
Aboriginal Elder Mrs Alice Kelly at the prehistoric site of Lake Mungo. Consultation with relevant Aboriginal people concerning such sites is an essential part of significance assessment procedures. (photograph: John Fairfax and Sons Ltd Feature Services)

Excavation of a prehistoric Aboriginal site, Graman, New South Wales. Removal of part of the fabric by excavation is necessary to elucidate the scientific or research value of such sites. (photograph: W. Webster)
present life. As such it is ours to control and it is ours to share on our own terms. That is the central issue in this debate. (Langford 1982)

This assertion of custodianship has been strongly contested by those who seek to preserve Aboriginal sites for their research or heritage value and who feel that their value to humanity must be greater than their value to any particular group. Incorporation of Aboriginal sites into the heritage movement helps to establish and validate the Australian past assimilation of Aboriginal sites as part of the Australian heritage and gives Australians a history of 40,000 years instead of 200. It can also be an important unifying force in an Australia which is becoming increasingly multicultural. However, there are severe problems for Aborigines in having their sites and their culture interpreted in this way by a dominant European culture.

There is than a conflict about custodianship, with important implications for cultural resource managers and other conservation practitioners. To understand this more clearly we need to look at the underlying reasons for Aboriginal assertions of custodianship of all sites.

Australia was taken from Aborigines by force, without any agreement, treaty or acknowledgement of prior ownership or occupation. No general agreement has been reached to this day. Therefore the assertion of custodianship over Aboriginal sites by white has no basis, as far as Aborigines are concerned, and could be regarded as part of this ongoing illegal process. There is no doubt that Aborigines so regard it.

Sites themselves are important evidence of substantial Aboriginal occupation of Australia. Europeans in Australia have in the past maintained that Australia, prior to European settlement, was to all intents and purpose, unsettled (unowned), or at least unused or unmodified in any significant way. But Aboriginal sites are tangible proof of Aboriginal modification of the landscape. It has been argued in international law that proof of occupation and therefore prior ownership of a country rests on proof of a material impact on that country (Jones, quoted in Wright 1982, 58). The evidence of and from Aboriginal sites destroys the legal fiction that Australia was essentially unoccupied at the time Europeans arrived.
However, Aborigines are very suspicious of the way Europeans have interpreted their past. They have reason to be so. When this country was invaded by Europeans, the dispossession of Aborigines and the acts of often violent aggression by which this was accomplished were justified in part by the assertion that Aborigines were primitive, or sub-human: a lower link in the evolutionary chain, destined in the view of most nineteenth century scientists, to be displaced by a high order (Mulvaney 1958, 297). Europeans, from this self-serving early interpretation of Aborigines, have developed a more sophisticated and disinterested view of the history and nature of Aboriginal society: but the key fact is that Europeans still control Aboriginal prehistory with expertise, funding, and control of information. Though anthropologists now deride the concept of the Australian Aborigines as 'primitive savages', the ordinary person's view of the Aborigines dervies from earlier scientific theories and teachings such as those outlined above. This process has not ceased. A recent, generally sympathetic, film on the Tasmanian Aborigines, The Last Tasmanian put forward a well respected prehistorian's suggestion, derived from his study of Tasmanian Aboriginal sites, that the Tasmanian Aborigines may already have been doomed before the whites came, because of the small size of their population, and its isolation from any other human society. This convenient theory has been taken up quite widely. It assists in justifying the European settlement of Tasmania. The film also implies that the last Tasmanian Aborigines died last century. This view is used to deride or oppose Tasmanian Aborigines today, struggling for recognition and land rights.

The problem here is not that such theories are aired, but that the European researchers essentially create and control Aboriginal prehistory. Aborigines, as an oppressed minority, have no effective way of influencing the majority culture's view of their past, yet this view, because it is that of the majority culture, can have a profound effect on the way in which Aborigines are regarded, and consequently on their lives.

Aborigines have been studied as subjects, not participants, for a long while. Their sites have been disturbed. The homes of their ancestors dug up. The have been measured, numbered and typed. This has resulted in some important information, for example, the long occupation of Australia by Aborigines is a fact discovered as a result of research, which is now used
politically by Aboriginal people. However, study of Aboriginal prehistoric sites, and their interpretation to the public often enhances the knowledge of Aboriginal society in the past, at the expense of distancing it from present Aboriginal society and its problems. Aborigines are portrayed as being in the dreamtime; before the whites came. Their past technical achievements: art, culture and way of life are described in glowing terms. There is however often no real explanation of the traumatic changes which produced today's Aboriginal society and no understanding of the continuity of essential cultural traditions, or the achievements, needs and aspirations of today's Aborigines, who are somehow not as real and certainly not as admirable as their dreamtime ancestors.

Aborigines are not, therefore, wholeheartedly enthusiastic about Aboriginal studies as pursued by Europeans, or in particular, about European management and interpretation of Aboriginal sites. The European community is rich in mythology. One of the persistent myths is that the European interpretation of Aboriginal culture is value-free; the true or objective interpretation. It is usually on these grounds that Europeans reject the Aboriginal claims of custodianship. It is said that no one owns the past. What is not admitted (or realised) it that the dominant culture owns the past. Often this hegemony has been used, in Australia, to discredit Aborigines. The prejudices or interests of white society have been and are reflected in its interpretation of the Aboriginal heritage.

Ros Langford again:

Underlying that view is the notion that heritage, no matter from which particular group it originates, and no matter what the view, the culture, the religion, or conceptual significance that heritage has to the particular group, is the property of mankind. Mankind, needless to say, is mainly represented by that culture which has and continues to exploit and invade the lands and culture of other societies. The mankind that view refers to is of course the white one ... The view itself sounds quite reasonable, but is has enabled and justified the domination of other groups by the powerful ...

(Langford 1982)

This characteristic of Aboriginal sites - their significance (and political importance) to a distinct minority group in the community - has important consequences for 'the investigative and evaluative processes which
determine the cultural significance of Aboriginal sites as a basis for conservation policy'.

Nothing in the guidelines directly prevents the practitioner taking this potential significance into account: but neither does it guide or assist the practitioner to a realisation of the problem and the implications.

Because the guidelines were designed by the majority culture they assume that the main value of a site will be its heritage value - i.e. its value to that majority culture; and that the practitioner will be of that culture. This very concept is offensive to many Aborigines, no matter how impeccable the end result. For all the reasons outlined above, Aborigines demand a full say in the management of their sites, and will not, on principle, accept less. Thus in the case of the archaeological sites on the Franklin River, in Tasmania, Aborigines did not quarrel with the statement of significance prepared by Dr Jones (Jones 1982) - but with the fact that Tasmanian Aborigines had been excluded from the process of assessment. (Langford 1982)

In most cases, the white practitioner can have no way of really assessing the value of a site, except in her own terms, unless there is a process of real consultation, and a genuine attempt to accept as equally valid the views of another culture. The Willandra Lakes are listed as part of the World Heritage, because of their immense significance, arrived at by a process which in general terms followed the guidelines for assessment laid down in this document (with one exception, which I will discuss later). Many Aborigines however are affronted by research work at the site. The site has been afforded great significance and importance by Europeans, but Aborigines have been excluded, until recently, from any meaningful role in this scientific endeavour. Some feel studied, and ripped off; insulted that without consultation their ancestors are being used in international discussions about human evolution. Other regard the exercise as desecration of Aboriginal graves. Arguments about science, time depth and the origins of the Australian Aboriginal are not, at present, relevant to this culturally distinct view.

The guidelines counsel assessment of all aspects of significance. They do not, however, canvass the problem of conflicting types of significance.
Bob Ellis summed up the problem recently in a letter to me, in which he compared this problem with another with which ICOMOS has been concerned.

At the last meeting of the ICOMOS Committee held in Sydney, members discussed a paper on the Conservation of Urban Areas. The discussions did not resolve itself in any satisfactory way largely as a result of the discovery by members that those features that constitute urban areas may have different cultural values to different socio-economic groups in our society. In particular it was suggested that 'gentrification' of urban areas could have significant social influence on communities and their constitution. A similar situation appears to exist with respect to Aboriginal sites. That is to say, the European scientific community may identify features in a site which they credit with cultural significance which differ markedly from those which are significant in the Aboriginal cultural perspective. Consequently, to talk about analysis of Aboriginal sites poses the important problem of different and sometimes conflicting social and cultural values.

It seems clear that this problem should be referred to in the guidelines.

The guidelines do mention social significance or value: 'Social value embraces the qualities by which a place has become a cultural landmark: a part of community consciousness or a well established focus of political, national, or other cultural sentiment'.

American practitioners have suggested another type of significance: a subset of social significance which describes the value of a site to a discrete, minority group or culture within the community or majority culture. They have called it ethnic, or minority, significance. It is defined thus: 'A site which has religious, mythological social or other special importance for a discrete population is said to be ethnically significant' (Moretto, quoted in Schiffer and Gumerman 1977, 244). This concept is as applicable in Australia as in the United States. Both nations, the product of recent colonisation by an overwhelming, alien culture, have to find ways of coming to terms with the indigenous cultures which they almost obliterated. Discussion in the American literature about ethnic significance, indicates the relevance of this concept to Australia. The following passage refers specially to archaeological resources, but it can be seen to have general application.

By this definition, of course, ethnic significance overlaps somewhat with historical significance, but that is of little
concern. Ethnic significance has been overlooked in much of previous conservation archaeology; today, however, with the heightened awareness of many groups to their cultural heritage as revealed in archaeological sites, the investigator ignores ethnic significance only at great peril. Determination of ethnic significance requires consultation with groups who occupied a site, descendants of such groups and also groups who presently own or live near the sites under consideration. The latter criterion should be taken seriously; sometimes an archaeological site is an appreciable source of pride for a nearby community (Bell and Gettys n.d.). A potential problem is that archaeologists might not have the ability to define what is ethnically significant, and the suggestion they do smacks of some ethnocentrism.

(Schiffer and Gumerman 1977 244-45.)

There is perhaps even more need for consideration of ethnic significance in Australia than in the United States. This is because of the very important role that sacred sites play in Aboriginal religion; and because of the political importance of Aboriginal sites in general to Aborigines; a consequence of the absence of treaties, agreements or land rights legislation for Aborigines. Aboriginal concerns and interests are in my opinion relevant to every Aboriginal site; sacred, significant, or prehistoric and should feature in every statement of significance and conservation plan which deals with such sites.

Remedying the guidelines in the ways I have suggested will not remedy the situation or resolve the conflicts; but I hope they will make practitioners (at this stage mainly white) aware of their obligations to consider the rights of minority groups and the implications for them of site management and conservation.

My brief is to discuss Aboriginal sites; but much of what I have said above applies, in a less dramatic way, to other minority groups within the community. In general terms the guidelines are bland and soothing; they do not prepare the unwary practitioner for Victoria Street or Myall Creek. They do not come to grips with the reality of social conflict within our society. The past, and our present dealing with it, are both rooted in our ideology and culture; there is no such thing as an objective statement of significance. The guidelines, by omission, imply that a true interpretation of the past is possible, and fail to warn the practitioner against an inevitable subjectivity.
There are no statements of significance for Aboriginal sites in accordance with the guidelines but there are now a number of plans of management and similar documents, which have the same broad general aims. They logically follow the steps outlined in the guidelines. One such, which deals with a site of significance to Aborigines, is the Biamanga (Mumbulla Mountain) plan of management. Mumbulla Mountain on the south coast of New South Wales was proposed for woodchipping. It contained sites of religious significance to the local Aboriginal community. The plan accepts the significance of the area to Aborigines as the major value of the area and proposes management strategies which protect the sites from physical or visual disturbance. The plan was proceeded by an investigation and a statement of significance. The whole process relied on detailed anthropological research and consultation with the Yuin tribal council. A stated aim of the plan was to protect the sites in accordance with Aboriginal wishes, and detailed proposals for future management has this as a prerequisite.

There are numerous examples of similar plans, which acknowledge Aboriginal interests, in other States, especially the Northern Territory (for example the Plans of Management of Uluru and Kakadu National Parks). In some cases, such considerations are lacking not only in practice, but in theory. In some areas Aboriginal assertion of special or traditional beliefs or rights with reference to their culture and sites are not recognised, or are specifically discouraged. One of the problems with the present guidelines is that through omission they present no problems of application in this situation or, to put it another way, they do not provide site managers with assistance in coming to terms with this crucial issue.

'Scientific' Value of Sites

Another characteristic that some Aboriginal sites have as a prime value, is their potential for providing information about past human culture, the environment, or human behaviour generally. This value is variously called scientific, archaeological, research or informational value. Aboriginal sites which have this value include sites with occupation deposit - places where people have lived or worked and left evidence of their presence, for example stone an other artefacts, food remains, and charcoal. Other types of sites, art sites for example, also have research value; the art is an
artefact which reflects cultural traits over time and space and can be used to elucidate the Aboriginal past. In fact all cultural sites have some informational or research value; but presently I want to concentrate on looking at those sites which have this characteristic as a major value.

Clearly, the Willandra Lakes sites in New South Wales have such value. So has Kuti-Kina (Fraser) cave on the Franklin River, Tasmania. In both cases the significance of the sites has been described in terms of their capacity to provide very significant new information which will answer important questions about the Aboriginal, and human, past in Australia and about the past environmental history of Australia. (See the nomination of the Willandra Lakes for inclusion in the World Heritage List and Jones 1982.)

Here is how John Mulvaney described the potential of the deposit in the Franklin caves, for Bulletin readers:

The limestone and dampness have combined to preserve evidence in these caves in a remarkable manner. The degree of preservation and the sheer quantity of material places these caves in the forefront of Pacific region sites. However, most inferences depend upon a square metre of excavated deposit.

Vivid layers of sediment and charcoal are sealed beneath a capping of flowstone. The charcoal provides a time scale through radiocarbon dating. Microscopic pollen grains embedded in the strata offer prospects of tracing the vegetational sequence, from the grasslands which supported the marsupials to the advent of the rain forest which choked off man and beast. Bones of animals abound, enabling detailed study of human diet and changing animal populations as the climate warmed and the humid rains converted the region to the wettest in Australia.

There are incredible quantities of stone flakes and tools - more than 75,000 of them in the area excavated. Around 18,000 years ago, natural glass was being utilised, carried here from the Darwin meteorite impact some 25km away. The presence of ochre is a clue that non-material aspects of culture also figured. All this data allows detailed studies of climatic fluctuations and reconstruction of economic life in detail unsurpassed overseas.

While such sites may be excavated in salvage operations, these can only treat the deposit, not the caves. Archaeology is a rapidly changing discipline, as are related laboratory techniques. Excavations conducted today will seek answers and use the apparatus of today. In Europe, cave sites have been excavated and re-excavated for more than a century. (Mulvaney 1983)
In Australia, prehistoric sites in general have more research or scientific potential than sites relating to recent European settlement. This is because they are a major source of information about Aboriginal prehistory, and since this prehistory has such a great time depth, the sites have potential for answering important questions about natural history and human evolution and adaptation.

However, European sites also have this value. In particular European sites with archaeological deposit, or which consist of archaeological deposit, have research potential as a major value. They may tell us about Australian history; or about past events, technology or social life. For example, one of the fields of interest of both prehistorians and historians is how a culture copes with changes in environment, and what patterns of adaptation can be observed. Australia is one of the classic 'frontier' countries, where humans with a culture developed under one set of conditions (in this case of England) had to adapt rapidly to an entirely different environment and new set of demands on their cultural 'tool kit'. In the United States, study of 'frontier' settlement sites is uncovering evidence about the process of cultural adaptation which goes beyond the evidence presented in the written documents of the period. It is highly likely that, similarly, new evidence will be found in Australian frontier sites which is of great anthropological as well as historical interest.

Another example is the case of Irrawang Pottery, a pottery and vineyard in the Hunter Valley which operated from the mid 1830s to the 1850s. Here archaeology has produced evidence of the range of pottery produced in early New South Wales, has traced the origin of the designs, identified local adaptation due to available materials, isolation from technological advances in Europe, and local requirements, and has given a new insight into the scale and complexity of an early colonial industry. Most of the evidence is valuable in terms of expanding our knowledge of New South Wales history, but some of it is of wider relevance in the history of nineteenth century technology world wide. (Pearson in Sullivan and Pearson 1983)

Sites which have archaeological research potential have a number of common characteristics. The original 'fabric' of the site - the walls, the wind breaks, the original furnishings - have often largely disappeared. The significant 'fabric' is often the contents, the debris, the discarded and
broken by-products of past living, often more intact and valuable if the site has been abandoned rather than continually restored and refurbished over a long period.

It seems to me that this research value, common to both Aboriginal historic sites, has been very largely ignored in these guidelines. Though space does not allow a thorough discussion of archaeological sites, many of my remarks about Aboriginal prehistoric sites also refer to European archaeological sites.

There is a section in the guidelines on scientific value. This is what it says:

Scientific value for past generations, that is, relation to scientific or technological history, is to be judged simply as a specific case of historic value. Because these principles deal with the man-made environment rather than with places of botanical, zoological or similar interest, scientific value for present or future generations is not normally at issue.

There are a number of problems with this. The definition appears to have been interpreted in the narrowest way possible, to mean scientific value to our ancestors - presumably a new type of metal refining process plant would have scientific significance under this definition - but not necessarily Fraser Cave. However, scientific value, in its broadest sense, is an issue for present and future generations.

I also am not very happy with the use of the term 'scientific' because (as here) it tends to be used very narrowly. In fact Aboriginal sites often have considerable significance for the natural sciences - from them we are able to learn a great deal about Australia's past natural history. For instance, Aboriginal sites are often an invaluable repository of information about Australia's past climate and environmental changes. At Lake Mungo clay balls moulded by Aborigines for fire stones, can tell us about Pleistocene variations in the earth's magnetic field.

This is however only one aspect of the wider informational value of sites which I prefer to call 'research' value. This is in fact the way the term 'scientific' is more usually used in this context:
A site or a resource is said to be scientifically significant when its further study may be expected to help answer current research questions. That is, scientific significance is defined as research potential. 
(Schiffer and Gumerman, 211)

There has been much discussion in the literature about assessment of research significance - I do not propose to recapitulate the arguments here. Bowdler (1981) provides a good coverage which puts the subject in an Australian perspective.

In Australia, with respect to prehistoric sites, Peter Coutts has devised a numerical system, based on factors such as site age, type, preservation, rarity, representativeness and research potential. (Coutts et al 1977 and Coutts 1982)

The sites are scored on this system and ranked. For a small, well defined region, where the potential of all sites is known, this system can work well as a short term measure. Many workers, however, oppose this system on several grounds. It seems to them to give a misleading impression of objectivity to what is actually a very subjective process. Such a numerical system also tends to fossilize the value of the site. But significance is always relative, and it can change for many reasons - further research, and new discoveries may dramatically change the scientific value of a site, or a group of sites.

In general terms, the assessment of scientific significance must be based on the researcher's knowledge of the subject, and on what she presently sees as the potential for solving research problems. Very many sites contain potential information; and judging them to be important just on this basis - that is, their capacity to supply data - is not a sufficiently selective process, and leads to mindless data collection, while not necessarily increasing our real knowledge. For example, a nineteenth century bottle dump may contain a great deal of information about nineteenth century bottles, but we must ask whether the information will add substantially and significantly to our knowledge of nineteenth century life in Australia. Thus Sandra Bowdler and Anne Bickford suggest that the relative scientific or research value of a site can be judged by answering the following questions:
- Can the site contribute knowledge which no other resource can? That is, can it provide information not available from documents or oral history, for example.

- Can the site contribute knowledge which no other such site can?

- Is this knowledge relevant to general questions about human history or other substantive subjects? (Sandra Bowdler, pers. comm.)

Answers in the affirmative (with supporting statements) will demonstrate the scientific or research value of a site. There are, as always, problems of application. We can confidently assert, on this basis, that the Willandra Lakes, or Fraser Cave have research value; but this is in part because we have little information about the whole resource. Systematic site survey in south west Tasmania may greatly increase the number of caves with research potential lessening the value of Fraser Cave in particular.

Research significance will change through time; and is particularly likely to in Australia, where comparatively little is known about the resource. Research significance must be established by preliminary research, sufficient to indicate the undoubted potential of the area or site. Identification of this research significance can and often does lead in time to public or historic value for the site. Sites at Lake Mungo have research value; but Mungo is also famous for past important and exciting discoveries, and hence is an area with public and social value to both blacks and whites. This process results from the realisation of research potential by the carrying out of significant research.

Another aspect of this problem is that sites with potential to solve research questions in the future may not be assessed as significant using this system. For example, before the discovery of radio-carbon dating techniques, using charcoal from ancient Aboriginal hearths, one major research use of such sites was unknown. Therefore in judging the research value of sites, professionals also employ the concept of representativeness - good representative examples should be 'stored' for future use - and this may be a very valid conservation strategy. Once again this argument has been used in the assessment of the Franklin Caves.
Clearly, ICOMOS needs to tackle this question, and to reshape or add to the guidelines, so that they incorporate this value - a very important reason for site conservation.

There are a number of recent statements of significance for sites with research potential which, while they do not follow the ICOMOS guidelines, are concerned with the same processes. Rhys Jones' statement on south west Tasmania for the Senate Select Committee (Jones 1982) is one such. It is possible to fit this statement within section 1.2 of the guidelines (context) but not very logically or easily; in this case the guidelines do not guide the practitioner towards a clear statement of the sites' principle significance. (I should note here that Rhys Jones' statement does not refer to present Aboriginal interests - a matter which has since been remedied.)

My comments have so far concentrated on the aspects of significance or value as outlined in the guidelines. I have discussed the Aboriginal and research value of Aboriginal sites. It follows that these values have direct implications for the investigative techniques, and the actual professional skills of the practitioners, employed in the preparation of a statement of significance. I think the guidelines should also reflect this. Archaeological and/or Aboriginal input are crucial for the production of a proper statement of significance in the cases I have discussed. [As discussed elsewhere, (guidelines for article 24) destructive research (excavation) into the fabric may also be necessary to elucidate the site's significance.]

It is also clear that the nature of Aboriginal sites has implications for the choice of conservation strategy. Because of Aboriginal attitudes, and of the research value of sites, and because especially in the case of archaeological sites the original fabric is often totally or partially missing, preservation, and occasionally restoration in its strictest sense, are the strategies usually judged appropriate for Aboriginal sites.

My general impression of the guidelines will be apparent. They were not written for Aboriginal sites, or archaeological sites; they seem to refer most easily to buildings and other standing monuments. They need revising and adding to in important ways. Alternatively, a separate set of
guidelines is required. I favour the former course because despite what I have said, I think most of the guidelines are appropriate for Aboriginal sites, since the principles of management are the same, and much of what I have said applies to elements of the European cultural heritage, as well as the Aboriginal. The Burra Charter has had a very important effect on conservation practice in Australia, and I expect these guidelines to be similarly successful.

I am also well aware that these are guidelines, and their usefulness is related to their brevity. I am not advocating major additions; a few succinct statements and some alterations and qualifications would I think achieve the desired result.
REFERENCES


R. Jones, 'Submission to the Senate Committee on South West Tasmania' Australian Archaeology, No 14, June 1982.


ADDITIONAL ITEMS FOR REFERENCES

