Opening Speech

Good morning, Ladies and Gentlemen. I would like to welcome you all to Canberra and to the Australia ICOMOS National Conference on World Heritage Listing, Management and Monitoring. I would also like to acknowledge and thank the Ngunnawal Traditional Owners on whose land this conference is taking place.

I am very happy to be here today to welcome you to this timely ICOMOS conference on World Heritage. Its subject matter coincides with the 240th session of the World Heritage Committee meeting in Cairns, later this month, and therefore comes at a time when heritage issues, and World Heritage issues in particular, are prominent in the hearts and minds of heritage professionals. This is particularly so in my case as I have been conferred the great honour of being the Australian State Party nominee as Chair the World Heritage Committee meeting in Cairns in November 2000.

Content

You will recall that ICOMOS was founded in 1965 after the adoption of the Charter for the Conservation and Restoration of Monuments and Sites (Venice Charter) in 1964. The Venice Charter became the key international standard for conservation practice and for the important work of the National Committees of ICOMOS. ICOMOS is an international, non-government, professional organisation, which today has 107 National Committees and approximately 6,600 members worldwide.

ICOMOS is a statutory Advisory Body to UNESCO through the World Heritage Convention. It provides technical expertise and specialist advice on the nomination of properties to the World Heritage List and provides State of Conservation reports to the World Heritage Committee. More widely, ICOMOS seeks to “gather, study and disseminate information concerning principles, techniques and policies for the conservation, protection, rehabilitation and enhancement of monuments, groups of buildings and sites.” (ICOMOS Statutes, Article 5b; http://www.international.icomos.org, 14 November 2000).

As an advisory body to the World Heritage Committee, ICOMOS plays a pivotal role in the identification and evaluation of potential World Heritage properties. The issues that the Australia ICOMOS conference on World Heritage has chosen to address in its ten sessions are pertinent and fundamental to both Australia and to the wider international community.

ICOMOS and the other advisory bodies to the World Heritage Committee, ICCROM and IUCN, play a pivotal role in the identification and evaluation of potential World Heritage properties. The Tentative List is also an important component of the formal process leading to identification and inscription. I do not intend to discuss the Tentative List in any more detail here, as it will be covered in Mr Kevin Keeffe’s talk later today.
I would, however, like to draw your attention to one of the properties on Australia's Tentative List, the Greater Blue Mountains Area, which is to be considered by the World Heritage Committee at its meeting in Cairns. The Greater Blue Mountains Area was nominated for inscription on the World Heritage List in 1998 on the basis of both natural and cultural values. The property affords an important example of values represented at different levels of significance. Discontinuity in the inter-relationships of nature and people within the property has particularly affected the more fertile and accessible areas. ICOMOS concluded the case for listing on cultural criteria is not strong, especially with regard to the predominantly natural areas included in the nomination. Although there is a significant assemblage of engraved rock art and some painted art in the Blue Mountains, lack of maintenance of this cultural heritage has seriously threatened the values and the advisory body concluded that these were not of outstanding universal significance.

The property's outstanding natural values are particularly related to the evolutionary significance of its eucalypt communities and also relics of past ages, such as the recently discovered Wollomi Pine, a 'living fossil' dating back to the time when dinosaurs roamed the earth. As well, the property provides outstanding representation of Australia's biodiversity, particularly the plants and animals of temperate forest and woodland communities which are not well represented on the World Heritage List.

Of course, there are also the superlative aesthetic qualities of the vast blue-tinted landscapes and the stark relief of its gorges and tablelands. Famous world-wide for these vistas, the Blue Mountains provide an ever-changing spectacle of landscapes with exquisite blue shades and hues. A characteristic and evocative blue haze is produced by the interplay of bright sunlight and the fine droplets of oils released by the eucalyptus that cover the rugged tablelands and deep valleys. The aesthetic qualities of the Blue Mountains have inspired creative endeavour in Australia and round the world.

The issues that the Australia ICOMOS conference on World Heritage has chosen to address are also crucial to the successful implementation of the World Heritage Convention and the application of the Global Strategy for a representative, balanced and credible World Heritage List. The World Heritage Committee adopted the Global Strategy at its eighteenth session in December 1994. In part, it seeks to increase the types of heritage inscribed on the List and also the regional representation of this heritage. The Global Strategy takes the form of an action program designed to identify the major gaps relating to types of properties, regions of the world, cultures, periods, biogeographical provinces, and biomes.

In particular, sessions seven and eight of this conference consider the protection of intangible cultural heritage values, both in Australia and internationally. This is an issue that is coming to the forefront of thinking in relation to the development of the Global Strategy with the inclusion of properties of outstanding universal value that do not necessarily exhibit a material cultural form. It is particularly relevant to the recognition and maintenance of the Aboriginal cultural heritage of Australia and of the cultures of the Pacific region.
Australia has been involved in a range of initiatives to recognize the importance of the continent’s indigenous heritage. In the World Heritage sphere, Australia has been prominent in discussions of how indigenous cultural heritage can best be represented on the World Heritage List. Our inscriptions, such as the cultural landscape of Uluru / Kata Tjuta National Park, are acknowledged to have shown the way as to how indigenous traditions, especially intangible heritage, can be inscribed on the List. The representation of such traditions is crucial if the World Heritage List is to be a proper reflection of the full range of cultural World Heritage values.

Australia has also led the way in showing the integrated nature of cultural and natural World Heritage values. It is one of the few State Parties with listed properties inscribed both for their natural and indigenous cultural World Heritage values. Aboriginal people play an important role in the management of these properties.

The World Heritage Committee meeting in Cairns is a timely venue to discuss the role of indigenous traditions in the World Heritage List. An Indigenous Forum on Representation of indigenous traditions on the World Heritage List will be held in conjunction with the Bureau and Committee meetings. The discussion of these issues at this ICOMOS conference in advance of this meeting are both prescient and timely.

In terms of other arenas of heritage protection, Australia is involved in other key initiatives. The Register of the National Estate, for example, deals with heritage in an integrated fashion with the Register reflecting all three types of heritage in Australia - natural, indigenous and historic. Such an integrated approach can be unusual, both within Australia and internationally. Many heritage registers deal only one aspect. Integration presents a more accurate reflection of how values exist in the landscape.

Another important initiative in indigenous heritage protection is the legislation at a State level to protect those indigenous sites that have a material manifestation. This legislation is unusual because it provides blanket protection to sites, whether the sites have been recorded in a register or not.

As a National Committee, Australia ICOMOS was formed in 1976. Australia ICOMOS, and many of its members individually, have been at the forefront of the development of conservation philosophy and theory, and its promotion through standards and practice of practical cultural heritage conservation. Australia ICOMOS has achieved a world standard in cultural heritage management through the development and provisions of the Burra Charter (The Australia ICOMOS Charter for Places of Cultural Significance). The Burra Charter was adopted on 10 August 1979 in the old mining town of Burra, South Australia, and is a set of national guiding principles for conserving places of cultural heritage significance.
The Burra Charter, based on the principles of the Venice Charter, provides a framework for the conservation and management of places of cultural significance, and provides a national standard of professional practice for those engaged in all aspects of cultural heritage management. The Burra Charter has also provided a world standard for cultural heritage management. It is currently being used in the United Kingdom, and as a result of mutual cooperation and discussion, China has taken it as the basis of its new national heritage guideline. On 26 November the Australian Heritage Commission and the Chinese State Administration for Cultural Heritage will sign a Memorandum of Understanding on cultural heritage cooperation for cultural heritage places.

Minor revisions were made to the Burra Charter in 1981 and 1988 but a major five-year review process began in 1995 and culminated in the revised Burra Charter. The latest revisions to the Burra Charter were adopted on 26 November 1999 and I am proud and pleased to be launching the revised Burra Charter during this morning's coffee break, where I hope you will all join me at a formal commencement of the next chapter in the development of this internationally-renowned, respected, and much used document.

As Australia approaches the centenary of Federation it continues to examine its achievements as a nation, and nowhere more so than in the field of cultural heritage management and protection. The National Heritage Places Strategy, which was begun more than two years ago, has been developed in response to such reflections. Through a Bill for amendments to the Environmental Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999 (EPBC), announced by Senator Robert Hill on 30 June 2000, the National Heritage List and the Commonwealth Heritage List will be established.

The National List

The National Heritage List "would comprise places of outstanding national importance and heritage significance to the Australian people. It would include places of natural, historic and indigenous heritage value" (Senator the Hon. Robert Hill, 30 June 2000). Properties included on the proposed National Heritage List will be identified as places of national environmental significance and, as such, protected through the new EPBC Act that came into force in July 2000. Any action that is likely to have a significant impact on the values of places protected by the Act triggers the requirement for an assessment of the action and approval by the Commonwealth Minister for the Environment and Heritage.

In addition to the National Heritage List, the Bill to amend the EPBC Act will also provide for a list of heritage places managed or owned by the Commonwealth of Australia. This will include places or groups of places in Commonwealth lands and waters, and ownership identified by the Australian Heritage Council as meeting prescribed heritage criteria, and which the Minister decides warrant the protection provided by entry in the Commonwealth Heritage List. A nomination to the List will be assessed by criteria specified in the Act. Initial entries to the Commonwealth List will be those properties on the Register of the National
Estate that are 'Commonwealth Places'. Most places on the Commonwealth Heritage List will be protected under Section 26 of the EPBC Act and significant impacts on the values of the properties will trigger the requirement for an assessment of the action and approval by the Commonwealth Minister for the Environment and Heritage.

Under the proposed new heritage regime, it is envisaged that while no new places will be added to the Register of the National Estate: after the new legislation is passed, the database will continue to be publicly accessible. The Register will remain an important information resource on the Australian Heritage Places Inventory, which will link national, state and territory heritage databases through the Internet.

The Register of the National Estate will serve as an explicit trigger for Commonwealth actions under Section 28 of the EPBC Act. This means that the Commonwealth must not take an action inside or outside Australia without the Minister’s approval, if it may have a significant impact on the heritage values of a place listed on the Register. Section 28 of the EPBC Act will offer far stronger protection for heritage places than is currently possible under Section 30 of the Australian Heritage Commission Act. Section 28 protection will also extend to places on State heritage lists.

Further legislative changes will establish the Australian Heritage Council which will succeed the work of the Australian Heritage Commission and will develop themes for listing and advise the Government on the heritage significance of places proposed for inclusion on the National Heritage List. Within the World Heritage forum, Australia’s EPBC Act provides the only domestic legislation of its kind in the world currently in force, that protects World Heritage properties.

Some of the key elements of the EPBC Act 1999 are that it provides:

- Up-front protection for world heritage properties, rather than the last-resort protection offered under previous legislation
- A stronger and more efficient assessment and approvals process
- Improved management for all world heritage properties through the application of consistent world heritage management principles and more robust Commonwealth / State arrangements.

All properties on the World Heritage List are defined as ‘declared World Heritage properties’ and are therefore protected by the EPHC Act. The Commonwealth Minister for the Environment and Heritage also has the power to declare other properties to be World Heritage properties where:

- The property has been nominated for, but not yet inscribed on, the World Heritage list; or
- The property has not been nominated for World Heritage listing but the Minister believes that the property contains world heritage values that are under threat.
Australia has thirteen World Heritage listed properties that, together, represent eighteen years experience in the nomination, planning and management of World Heritage. Throughout the Asia-Pacific region, Australia has actively promoted best practice management though facilitating and supporting workshops for World Heritage managers in the region.

Australia continues to pursue the identification and nomination of areas that contain World Heritage values. Over the past few years, Australia has focussed on ensuring that nominations are pursued cooperatively, and only with the full agreement of relevant state governments, and involvement of affected local communities and other stakeholders.

Australia is committed to further improving the already high standards of management of its World Heritage properties and continues to strive for best practice management that meets international obligations and satisfies the varying needs in Australia’s World Heritage properties. Australia has pursued the development of best practice management arrangements across all World Heritage properties with the aim of ensuring that Australia’s obligations under the Convention are met and that all properties are managed to a consistently high standard. An important element in achieving best practice management arrangements is having a comprehensive monitoring strategy for each World Heritage property. Consistent with the views of the World Heritage Committee, Australia has initiated development of a framework for the systematic monitoring and periodic reporting of the state of conservation of its properties. Monitoring World Heritage is an issue that will be discussed in the round table, Session 10 of this conference.

In Conclusion

I am confident that many of the issues I have raised this morning will be taken up by our eminent speakers during the next two days and by Barry Jones, the Vice-President of Australia ICOMOS, who will be the guest speaker at our Conference dinner tonight in the wonderful surroundings of the National Gallery of Australia. It is clear that Australia ICOMOS has continued to play an important role in developing alternative models for heritage management since its adoption of the Burra Charter in 1979, including through its ongoing work and conference programs such as we are going to enjoy over the next two days.

I am in no doubt that our conference program will challenge some of our firmly held perceptions about World Heritage. Importantly it will help launch ICOMOS Australia, and the World Heritage community, into the 21st Century more adequately equipped to tackle the challenges and opportunities of the developing perceptions of cultural heritage in the modern world. Your contributions to the discussions that will take place will be an invaluable part of this process and will help ensure the identification and protection of our cultural heritage for future generations.