Conservation v. Tourism: Can’t we still be friends?

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Can’t we still be friends? At the Port Arthur Historic Site, as for many other cultural sites in Australia and around the world, tensions can arise between the obligation to implement ‘best practice’ conservation management ideology and the pressure to be a more attractive target for the tourism dollar. In this paper I will discuss a number of recent initiatives developed at Port Arthur which demonstrate that conservation and tourism really can work together to achieve both best practice conservation objectives and a quality visitor experience.

A brief history of Port Arthur

Port Arthur: a penal station from 1830 to 1877

Port Arthur was established by a small group of convicts and soldiers under the command of Dr John Russell in September 1830. By the late 1830s Port Arthur had become the centre of an industrial enterprise that included lime making, saw milling, ship building, coal mining, brick and pottery manufacture, stone quarrying, leather tanning and agricultural production. Virtually every material necessary to sustain the settlement was produced on site.

Transportation to Van Diemens Land ceased in 1853. By the 1860s Port Arthur was increasingly occupied by sick and ageing convicts, lunatics and paupers. A Paupers Mess was constructed in 1864 and an Asylum in 1868. Port Arthur closed down in 1877.

A cultural tourism destination: early pressures

Concurrently with the development of the settlement of Carnarvon, the site became increasingly popular with tourists, who arrived by steamer or coach from Hobart. Former convicts and paupers who had been incarcerated at Port Arthur transformed themselves as guides, providing tourists with colorful stories about the place. Harry Winter was one who would take off his shirt and show the scars on his back for a shilling a time. Buildings from the convict period were converted into hotels and boarding houses to cater for tourists who required accommodation for their trip to the site. The Commandant's House became the Hotel Carnarvon in 1884, the Junior Medical Officer's House became the Hotel Arthur in the early 1920s and the Magistrate's Residence was converted to a boarding house.
Government bureaucracy moves in: community moves out

In the early years of the twentieth century concerns were expressed from many quarters about the condition of the structures on the site. With State government assistance, in 1914 the first conservation work was carried out when the walls of the church were partially reconstructed and stabilised. In 1915 the Tasmanian Scenery Preservation Board (SPB) was formed to identify sites possessing 'scenic or historic interest' and to purchase such land in private ownership for preservation.

Beginning in 1918, land was gradually re-purchased to consolidate the historic site, and to protect its historic and tourism value to Tasmania. This process has been ongoing since that time and the current authority has recently completed the purchase of the timber St. David's Church, the last remaining plot of land in private ownership on the site. Largely as a result of the growing tourist industry, and to refocus on its historical importance as a convict site, Carnarvon was renamed Port Arthur in 1927.

During the Scenery Preservation Board administration and beyond, many of the timber houses and other structures built during the Carnarvon township period were demolished. These demolitions were apparently carried out because of a perceived need to enhance the expectations of tourists by excluding the 'non-convict' aspects of life in Port Arthur.

Changing bureaucracies: highs and lows

In 1972 the Department of National Parks and Wildlife took over control for Port Arthur and a number of other former convict sites in Tasmania from the Scenery Preservation Board. In 1979 the Port Arthur Conservation and Development Project (PACDP) was initiated with joint funding from the Federal and State governments of $9m, by far the greatest injection of funds into the site in its post-1877 history. The PACDP ran from 1979 until 1986, and was a regional project that included the conservation and development of other historic resources on the Tasman Peninsula. At Port Arthur it emphasised co-operative relationships between archaeology, historical interpretation, architecture and engineering and was unprecedented in Australia, both in length and complexity. There are many conservation professionals in Australia who learned their craft at Port Arthur during this period.

The completion of the PACDP also saw the end of substantial funding for conservation works on the site. Many of the conservation and interpretation initiatives from the early 1980s remain in place, but are urgently in need of reassessment due to either wear and tear or changes in approach that have evolved since that time.

Port Arthur Historic Site Management Authority

Port Arthur site has, since 1987 been controlled by the Port Arthur Historic Site Management Authority (PAHSMA). The Authority operates under its own act, the Port Arthur Historic Site Management Authority Act 1987, and is funded primarily by the government of Tasmania.

PAHSMA was designated a Government Business Enterprise (GBE) in 1996, under the Government Business Enterprise Act proclaimed the same year. This meant that Port Arthur was now a semi-independent government authority that is provided with an annual budget by the Tasmanian Government, but controlled by an appointed Board rather than being directly under the control of the Tasmanian bureaucracy. Significantly however, in 1997 PAHSMA was given exemption from paying a return to the Tasmanian Government as would normally be a requirement of a GBE.

A place of tragedy

On April 28 1996 a lone gunman murdered 35 innocent people at the Port Arthur Historic Site. The massacre represented the worst such event in modern Australian history, and added another layer to the complex heritage of human tragedy at the Site. This event had extraordinary implications for Port Arthur, its workforce, and the community of which it is a part. One of these implications was that the imperative to formulate and fund a long-term conservation management strategy for the Site was further deferred while more immediate human impacts were resolved. The special funds that were made available to Port Arthur as a result of the tragedy were directed to projects such as a tragedy memorial and the new Visitors Centre which was opened in 1998 (see Lennon, this volume).

Funding by the smallest state in the Commonwealth

Tasmania is the smallest state in the Commonwealth, with a population of less than half a million. It has the highest level of unemployment of any state, and the economy was for many years hampered by a lack of investment and the loss of markets for primary and manufacturing industries. Conversely, a recent Tasmanian government study has determined that there are more sites and individual structures listed as heritage items in Tasmania than in any other State. The taxpayer dollars available for the conservation and interpretation of these places are spread very thin indeed.

As a consequence, between the end of the Port Arthur Conservation and Development Project in 1986 and mid-2000, the conservation and interpretation of the site has been carried cut on subsistence funding from the Tasmanian Government. Federal Government funding has been limited to one-off special projects such as the construction of the new Visitors Centre in 1998 following the tragic events of April 1996. This project was criticised by many who regarded the initiative as another example of a poorly planned response to a perceived tourism demand, and where any impact upon cultural heritage values was not adequately assessed.

During all of this time, the pressure was on Port Arthur to return a profit to the Government, or at least not to be a serious burden on the limited number of taxpayers in the smallest state of Australia. Initiatives to boost the tourism dollar were many and varied, from imaginative military re-enactments and novelty rides around the Site to the sale of bottles of 'convict sweat'. It is questionable to what extent these initiatives enhanced visitor understanding of the history and cultural significance of Port Arthur. Meanwhile, funding for conservation work was uncertain and dependent on the capricious goodwill of Treasury. Tourism ruled the roost.

So what has changed?

Current funding

Following a decade and a half of funding insecurity, the current Tasmanian Labor Government in May 2000 announced a funding package of $10m over five years for conservation and interpretation works at the Port Arthur site. The availability of guaranteed direct State government funding was a consequence of a number of factors that coincided at this
critical time for Port Arthur, in particular:

- The release of the March 1999 report by the University of Tasmania which quantified the flow-on economic benefits to the Tasmanian economy of the Port Arthur Historic Site.
- The adoption by the PAHSMA Board in April 2000 of the PAHS Conservation Plan prepared by cultural heritage consultants Godden Mackay P/L and Context P/L. The Plan established the significance of the Site in a national and international context, and set broad 'best practice' conservation policies.
- A case prepared by PAHSMA for adequate and continuous funding by the State government. The case argued that the future of the Site as a major cultural and economic asset for Tasmania was in danger as a consequence of inadequate funding for essential conservation work over many years.

This funding commitment represents the first major investment in the site as a place of national, and probably international, cultural significance since the end of the Port Arthur Conservation and Development Project in 1986.

PAHSMA has since undergone a process of reorganisation within the Conservation Department. The purpose was to ensure that the necessary tools (staff, planning and technical) were in place to implement what is an ambitious but essential conservation and interpretation programme for 2000-2005. Without the five-year funding commitment from the Tasmanian Government, this reorganisation, and 'scaling-up' process would not have been possible. Strategic conservation programmes could not be developed, professional staff could not be attracted, and the necessary tools could not be purchased.

Most importantly, the arrangement was a clear acceptance by government that at a place such as Port Arthur essential conservation programmes must be supported, notwithstanding that the revenue received from tourism will not be able to fully provide the funds for these programmes. This acceptance had the effect of significantly diminishing the pressure to compromise conservation objectives to extract a maximum return from tourism and has resulted in a significant shift in the management approach at the Site.

**The Port Arthur Historic Site Conservation Plan 2000**

The PAHS Conservation Plan was adopted in April 2000 by the PAHSMA Board, and provides the basis for both strategic and day-to-day decision-making about conservation initiatives at Port Arthur. It also provides guidance for the sometimes difficult exercise of balancing commercial objectives against best practice conservation management.

The plan clearly enunciates the fundamental obligation of society generally and of the Authority in particular when it states in the Synopsis that 'There is nothing more important about the future management of the PAHS than the obligation to achieve its long term conservation'. Therefore, in adopting the plan, PAHSMA acknowledges and accepts this obligation, with the effect that the whole organisation is subject to the plan, not just the obsessive zealots in the Conservation Department.

The plan also established a structure for a range of subsidiary plans, with the intention of providing an increased level of strategic detail within each of the main areas of conservation activity (see Mackay, this volume). The Authority is well advanced with the process of implementing the plan hierarchy, which is a further indication of the commitment to qualitative conservation outcomes across the whole organization.

**What happens now?**

The commitment by the Tasmanian Government of adequate funding for conservation work at Port Arthur until at least 2005 has had a profound impact upon the organization. The need to achieve a maximum return from inappropriate tourism initiatives to fund conservation objectives (and ironically to at times compromise these objectives) is no longer the driving imperative. Moreover, the organisational adoption of the PAHS Conservation Plan has resulted in the confidence to pursue an overall approach that has at its objective best-practice conservation and interpretation rather than gimmickry and novelty attractions.

**Conservation in action**

In particular — and this is the main point of this paper — the development of visitor activities that focus on current conservation projects is proving extremely successful. In some cases regular tours are offered to visitors where conservation work is in progress, and where a visitor can witness the expenditure of the critical Tasmanian government funding for conservation work. Current initiatives include:

- **Public Archaeology Tour.** Special tours of the Summer Archaeological Programme diggings are run twice daily throughout the summer. The programme has been developed and run by specialist archaeologists, with visitors being invited to get their hands dirty in the impressive excavations at the convict sawpits. Over the 2001-2002 summer thousands of visitors took the specialist tours, while many adults and children took to the trowel. Each of the Summer Programme excavation sites are also provided with signage to explain to free-ranging visitors the objective of each excavation, the history of that part of the Site, and updated information about the progress of the excavation.

**Figure 4 Public Archaeology Programme. (P. Romey)**

- **Historic Garden Tour.** Between November and January special tours focus on the historic gardens of Port Arthur, particularly the 1850s Government Gardens that were substantially reconstructed in 2001. The tour explains the
research process that was a precursor to the actual reconstruction, including extensive research of historic photographs, palynological and soil analysis, geophysical remote-sensing methods and exhaustive archaeological investigations. This work was done to establish the planting species, the type and location of paths, fences and other landscape features originally extant within the precinct. These tours are extremely popular with visitors and special garden tour groups.

- Conservation Work. Generally those conservation projects that involve the use of traditional trades (brick and stone replacement, repointing, indenting) or contemporary conservation methods (metal conservation, poulticing etc) are provided with specific signage to explain to the visitor the nature of the problem and what methodology is being used to conserve the fabric. Visitors take a great interest in this work, to the extent that the tradesmen have had to learn some communication skills to deal with questions and comments. The signage does however reduce the time lost in responding to queries.

Figure 5 Pat Jones Cottage: conservation of metal cladding. (P. Romey)

- Resource Centre and Convict Database. At Port Arthur there is ongoing research into the identities and the individual circumstances of those who occupied the place during the convict period. The information gathered concerns not only the convicts themselves but also those members of the military and the civil service who were assigned the role of supervising the day-to-day operation of Port Arthur. This research is not only an important aid to the conservation team at Port Arthur, it also provides a very popular service to visitors (both actual and via the web) who are seeking information about historical characters (often antecedents) who were at Port Arthur in one capacity or another.

The Resource Centre also contains a large collection of historic documents relating to the convict and later periods at Port Arthur, and a very comprehensive library of texts and research papers dealing with associated subjects ranging from crime and punishment to cultural tourism. The centre provides an extremely effective research tool for staff involved in the conservation of Port Arthur, and is a heavily utilised facility for researchers and the public.

- Active Interpretation. A range of active and interactive initiatives are incorporated into the overall interpretation strategy at Port Arthur e.g. summer plays, role-playing, traditional agriculture. To varying degrees, these initiatives incorporate physical conservation, e.g. the reconstruction of a 1930s cottage garden and domestic livestock at the Carnarvon-period cottage Trentham. In all cases, however, the critical component is authenticity of the interpretive message, even though the medium may include some creative licence.

Conclusions

Port Arthur operated as a prison from 1830 until 1877, a period of 47 years. The cultural significance of the place is primarily, but certainly not exclusively, this period of its history. However Port Arthur has been a historic site in public ownership (to varying degrees) for a much longer period, from 1915 until now, i.e. 87 years. Therefore, its history is largely written in its perceived importance as a place of historical interest, a tourism 'must see' and a laboratory for contemporary attitudes to conservation.

For much of this time, the conservation of the stones and bricks of Port Arthur, the stories of what happened there and the value of the place to contemporary society were subservient to its role as a key economic asset to the Tasmanian and the local economy. Decisions about what to conserve, how to conserve it, and what stories should be told...
were often (at least until the PACDP in the 1980s) determined by a populist response to what the punters wanted to see and hear. To a considerable degree, what the visitor to Port Arthur sees today is not only a palimpsest of sequential historical layers, but also the physical evidence of generations of intervention designed to present a somewhat narrow and selective view of history, which was ‘let’s give them what they’ve come to see’.

However, it is now recognised by Government that Port Arthur is a cultural asset of extraordinary significance to the state of Tasmania and beyond. But, it does not, and probably cannot, produce sufficient income to cover the real costs of conserving the asset. Therefore it is essential that sufficient public funding continue to be made available to ensure the best-practice conservation of the asset in the long term, and to ensure that inappropriate commercial initiatives that would promote a ‘Convict World’ approach to its conservation are rejected as both short-sighted and counterproductive. Integrity and authenticity in presenting the story of Port Arthur, combined with visible displays of conservation in action, are what visitors are increasingly coming to see.

In summary, Port Arthur is, in my view, important for two fundamental reasons:

1. It is of international cultural significance as a remote outpost established by the British for the secondary punishment of criminals and as an industrial gulag, and in its subsequent manifestations as a township, a tourist destination and a state-owned cultural site. This significance has not been in question for most of the last 100 years, and would exist even if the current management authority and its antecedents had never existed.

2. It is the product of what the past, current and future caretakers have done and will continue to do in order to conserve that cultural significance — not just the bricks and mortar but also the histories, the stories and the intangible values of the place for future generations.

It is increasingly clear that visitors to the Port Arthur Historic Site are interested in both of the above, and it is certain that the same would be true for other cultural heritage sites. Authenticity in interpretation and ‘best practice’ in conservation are complementary. In places like Port Arthur, the presentation of these complementary messages is good news for tourism — other places that lack the historic integrity of Port Arthur can cater to the ‘Convict World’ market.

The opportunity to see conservation in action provides a reason to visit places such as Port Arthur, and the opportunity to enhance the experience of visitors to the Site. It is also an incentive to return and to see more conservation in action, a fundamental objective of tourism operations. So yes, we can be friends.