Contested landscapes: Private shacks—public lands

Geoff Ashley*

* Ashley Built Heritage, 159 Wilson Street, Newtown, NSW, 2042
geoff@ashleybuiltheritage.com.au
Abstract

The identification of social heritage values from community, family and individual associations with cultural landscape use and practice, does not in itself provide the answers in the management of a cultural landscape that is also a shared public landscape. As a ‘live’ value, the survival of intangible social values, perhaps more than other heritage values, is predicated on good management.

To illustrate the problem, this paper addresses two case studies of shack settlement communities located within public lands in New South Wales and Western Australia. The fragility of the shacks and shack settlements themselves, in both societal and physical terms provides further challenges.

The key opportunity suggested here is to conserve social values by developing practical community governance and shared management that utilises cultural landscape management tools that engage both the land management agencies and shack owners. This will allow philosophical issues to be addressed at the interface of public/private and cultural/natural values with practical solutions: for example, better communication and engagement with the public. This paper also includes findings relevant to heritage practice generally.

Introduction

Coastal shacks and rural huts are not just small dwellings, but are more fundamentally defined by their connection to the use of a landscape place and the people who built them: for temporary accommodation for work in the case of rural huts and for recreation in the case of the coastal shacks discussed here. Huts and shacks are also important ‘way-points’ on paths and routes in cultural landscapes (see Australia ICOMOS 2015). The landscape place in turn affects the form and fabric of the huts and shacks.

The two case study places discussed in this paper are the shack communities located within public lands in Royal National Park (RNP), just south of Sydney in New South Wales (NSW) and the Wedge and Grey shack settlements located north of Perth in Western Australia (WA). In the former case, the heritage values are recognised but cooperative management is nascent. In the latter case, the WA State Government is introducing a management regime that does not recognise heritage values and will have significant adverse heritage impacts.

Shack settlements provide evidence of the development of a distinctive way of life associated with recreation for ordinary Australians from the middle of the twentieth century that was once common in coastal areas of Australia but is now very rare, with remaining settlements either being ‘normalised’ or removed entirely. The challenge is to find management approaches...
that will retain the fragile social and physical characteristics of shacks, while also providing for management within a public landscape.

There are about 200 recreation shacks located around four coastal beaches in RNP: Little Garie, South Era (Era), Burning Palms, and at Bulgo at the southern end of the Park near Otford. The largest group of 95 shacks is at Era (Figure 1). The northern three groups were constructed with the permission of the lessee of privately-owned lands before the lands were added to the then National, now Royal National Park, in the late 1940s (NPWS 1994). After the establishment of the National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS) in 1967, the shack owners were provided a terminating licence which meant that the licence died with the owner and the shack was removed. Community activism and a nomination for heritage protection in the early 1990s (Garder 1990) led to a moratorium on removals and to a draft Conservation Management Plan (CMP) that the author prepared while employed by NPWS (NPWS 1994).

Changes proposed by NPWS to licences in 2006 led to court action from the RNP Coastal Cabins Protection League (Protection League) representing the three groups of Little Garie, South Era, and Burning Palms. An out of court settlement resulted in an agreement on licence extensions to potentially 2027, and a nomination that led to inclusion on the NSW State Heritage Register (SHR) of these three groups, but not the Bulgo group that chose to not be party to those agreements (GML 2008). The SHR listing identifies historic, aesthetic, social and rarity value at a State level and states that ‘these cabin communities are historically important in a NSW context as evidence of the development of a distinctive way of life associated with recreation from the middle parts of the twentieth century, once common in coastal NSW but now rare’ (OEH SHR 2012).

In *Shack Life* by Ingeborg van Teeseling the author contributed a chapter on the architectural values of the RNP shacks, describing the importance of landscape place (Van Teeseling 2017, p. 255). A breathtaking setting links these three shack communities nestled around coastal beaches (Figures 1, 2 and 3) with the visual relationship between shacks and their landscape setting being a defining characteristic of place — the diminutive shacks sitting comfortably against their powerful natural backdrop (Figure 4). The landscape place in turn affects the form and fabric of the shacks—in the case of these three communities, the carrying in of all materials and the use of driftwood.

*Figure 1:* The shacks at Era are gathered like driftwood around the ‘high tide’ clearings of former pastoral lands (photo by the author).
There are close to 300 shacks located at Wedge, 150 km north of Perth, Western Australia, sheltered behind sand dunes and the small rocky Wedge Island several hundred metres off the coast (Figure 5). A further 20km up the coast are 100 shacks at Grey, also sheltered behind large dunes, around a bay and two beaches (Figure 6). The first shacks were constructed in the 1950s by professional fishers and inland pastoralists, however, most of the shacks were constructed by Perth residents from the late 1950s until the mid-1980s.
Indian Ocean Drive along the coast for tourist traffic in 2011, getting to the shacks meant arduous drives across potholed tracks through sand dunes (GML 2012).

Unlike the RNP shacks, these are squatter shacks located on Crown Reserves and managed by the WA Parks and Wildlife Service (PWS) within the Department of Biodiversity, Conservation and Attractions (DBCA). The squatter nature of the shacks is reflected in the use of reused materials and their ‘hand-made’ organic forms.
The RNP Shacks: Current Issues and Future Opportunities

The key issue is that the overall nature of the management of the shacks and the relationship between NPWS and the shack communities remains brittle. While there is a consultative committee and the shack owners contribute to Landcare and surf lifesaving on the beaches, the working relationship seems to fall back on the individual licence agreements.
Whilst there are a number of heritage listings:

- the SHR listing (OEH 2012);
- and the NPWS Key Heritage Stories, 2016 (Context 2016);

and also conservation and management planning documents:

- two Conservation Management Plans, (NPWS 1994; DEC 2005);
- and the RNP Plan of Management (NPWS 2000);

most of these documents separate natural and cultural values in a traditional manner and do not address cultural landscape aspects of the shacks and their social values.

The 2007 National Heritage listing of RNP (Australian Government 2007) is completely silent on the shacks and a 2017 RNP Plan of Management discussion paper on Park values (OEH 2017) did not acknowledge the State heritage values of the shacks. This equivocal approach by NPWS to the shacks is reflected in the large interpretive signs at lookouts above the shack groups that show the shacks in the landscape panoramas but provide no explanation of the shacks, their heritage values, or public rights and responsibilities when walking through the communities.

In 2017 the author was engaged by the RNP Coastal Cabins Protection League to provide strategic advice on future opportunities to allow the shack communities to be on the front foot as a change to the reactive nature of the relationship with Government to date (Ashley 2017b). Consultation for that project identified a desire by shack owners to explore governance options for a formal expression of the community in future management as a reflection of the social significance and community associations.

Public use and values are also changing. Broader societal changes have included dramatically increased visitation to some park features from social media postings, such as the Figure Eight Pools just south of Burning Palms. These changes are challenging to both NPWS in management and for the shack owners in the numbers of sometimes ill prepared walkers passing through the shack settlements. This is compounded by the lack of information provided to these visitors on the shacks. Equally, the nature of the heritage values held by public visitors for National Parks generally and for RNP in particular, as the second oldest National Park in the world, are not well documented.

The suggestions made here for a way forward for the RNP shacks are based on utilising all the dynamic values of the place. The history of Royal National Park is that of a contested landscape that started with the dispossession of Aboriginal peoples and was followed by the resumption of pastoral lands, the removal of shacks, the more recent friction around private places in the National Park, and the very recent impacts of social media generated visitation. While there is not open contestation, multiple values reflected in this contested history have not been resolved in management. The answer is to work hard at the interface between all values using a cultural landscape approach to find common ground and invite one ‘value’ into the other.

Cultural landscapes are ‘those areas which clearly represent or reflect the patterns of settlement or use of the landscape over a long time, as well as the evolution of cultural values, norms and attitudes toward the land’ (Context 2002). The two key aspects of patterns of use and evolving values are the nub of the issue here. The shacks represent a strong historical period marker for the use of RNP and have ongoing social values, however, there are also other values associated with this evolving landscape. A robust cultural landscape approach is needed to acknowledge and resolve all values, address actual issues at the interface of these values and lead to negotiated agreements. Such a cultural landscape approach would be both dynamic and flexible.

NSW NPWS have an appropriate model of a cultural landscape approach to use, although the author has not seen evidence of the use of this model in management planning. Cultural Landscapes: A Practical Guide for Park Management by Steve Brown, NPWS (DECCW 2010) identified management tools of holistic, active, adaptive, and integrated landscape
management—all words perhaps carrying risk but with great potential rewards as well. Similarly, other writings and models address the importance of ‘defining what is important and to whom’ (Heritage Council Victoria 2015). New Zealand writer Janet Stephenson describes a Cultural Values Model so that ‘those making decisions affecting landscapes are aware of the potential nature and range of cultural values’ (Stephenson 2008).

The key to a cultural landscape approach to management is that genuine agreement, not just engagement, is required where the values managed represent a living community, as is the case with shacks. The CMP prepared for the RNP shacks in 2005 (DEC 2005) actually covered the bases needed, however, it was resisted by the shack communities, as much because of the process as for its content—they were able to comment but NPWS ‘owned’ the process and product.

A two-pronged approach is recommended, with actions for both NPWS and the shack communities. For NPWS the answer is to more fully utilise a cultural landscape approach for its management planning, such as the Plans of Management required under the National Parks and Wildlife Act 1974 (NSW Government 1974). As part of this, more could be done to survey and understand public beliefs and values for national parks as cultural landscapes, including the historic structures in those parks.

For the shack owners, the answer is to focus on the form of future governance models that they desire and on the generational transfer of the responsibilities that arise from the ‘benefits’ history has bestowed on them. Shack owners also need to work at building relationships with groups in the shack community, the relationship with NPWS and with other external groups and organisations and to engage more with the public generally, including identifying opportunities to provide short term accommodation managed by the shack community. There is also an opportunity for the ‘shackies’ to develop their own code of conduct that articulates (in addition to practical aspects and requirements) expectations of behaviour and practice that conserves and passes on the intangible attributes of social values (see Australia ICOMOS 2017).

The most practical way to bring these two sets of recommendations together is to work through to an actual agreement between both NPWS and ‘shackies’ that will have reward points for both sides. This process should include the broader public, including in particular the Aboriginal communities who were effectively shut out of their own landscape.

**The Wedge and Grey Shack Settlements: Issues and Opportunities**

The Wedge and Grey shack settlement case study highlights a poor heritage process where the Western Australian Government has to date been unable to accept the challenges and opportunities to retain the heritage values of these shack communities, that it has itself identified, within a public land cultural landscape.

In 2011, the author led a heritage assessment of these shack settlements against WA State Heritage Criteria. It was concluded that the shack settlements met a number of criteria for State Registration including aesthetic, historic and social ‘nature of significance’ criteria, and both rarity and representative degrees of significance (GML 2012). This led to a National Trust of Australia (WA) nomination. The core value of these places is their rarity as evidence of a period and way of living largely lost in Australia; one that is completely different to the otherwise highly orderly and organised urban development of Western Australia. It is also a unique resource for anthropologists about the organisation of human settlements when, in theory, there is no organisation.

Although the WA State Heritage Office also concluded that these places met State heritage criteria and the WA Heritage Council endorsed this assessment, no action has been taken to progress the nomination for the last seven years. Rather, the Heritage Council specifically deferred consideration until the Parks and Wildlife Service (PWS) resolved a ‘management framework’ for the shacks. PWS has now abandoned that process and has however, proposed to introduce a number of policies that will greatly impact the shack values (Ashley 2019).
In 2017 the shack community associations engaged the author to prepare a report on the condition of the values as a result of this intransigence (Ashley 2017a). This report showed that both physical fabric and social values were being damaged, primarily from uncertainty associated with the introduction of a year by year licence renewal that resulted in deferred maintenance and physical impacts. The author has recently prepared the Wedge Shack Settlement Heritage Policies report for the Wedge Island Protection Association as a bauble against the draft policies that were proposed to be introduced without any consideration of heritage values (Ashley 2019).

This WA Heritage Council process is not at all in alignment with Australia ICOMOS Burra Charter process that requires an active acknowledgement of heritage values in developing management policies (Australia ICOMOS 2013). It also demonstrates that places such as shacks settlements have clear heritage value but ‘struggle for air’ with governments that are keen to ‘normalise’ public landscapes.

The WA Government should no longer delay the inclusion of the Wedge and Grey shack settlements on the WA State Register and should also embark on preparing a CMP with a strong cultural landscape focus and, as for RNP, have an agreement with stakeholders as its objective.

**Findings Relevant to Heritage Practice (and Government)**

1. Shacks and huts are particularly connected to landscape place, as an attribute of and evidence for, cultural landscape use and evolution and should not be addressed in isolation to those landscapes (see also Endnote 1).

2. Cultural landscapes are not necessarily beautiful landscapes—they are dynamic landscapes that reflect layers of history and loss as well as differing contemporary values reflected in that landscape. For shack settlements, government lands management agencies should adopt cultural landscape approaches in preparing management plans, such as by Brown (DECCW 2010), that may be more complex and dynamic but allow for better rewards in relation to multiple values.

3. A starting point to resolving conflicting values should be identifying common and shared views of the values of a landscape by all stakeholders. Conflicting values should then be addressed at their ‘interface’ to find ways to resolve or mitigate actual problems rather than conceptual issues.

4. Current management approaches to ‘national parks’ resulted from adopting US Parks Service models and ideology of the 1960s that created an idea of wilderness and strongly separated natural and cultural values. Different land reservation and management types should be considered, such as the more nuanced European models that accept living communities within national parks. For example, the NSW National Parks & Wildlife Act, 1974, contains an ‘Historic Site’ designation, now rarely used, that provides for ‘landscape of cultural significance’ (Part 4 Div 2 Clause 30F).

5. Public lands agencies can do more to document public views on the heritage values of these lands, including surveys to understand public values for National Parks, the historic structures in them, and the issues of private use.

6. When CMPs are prepared for lands that have a living community directly connected to the significance of the land, the CMP should include an Agreed Implementation section to reflect agreement with that community. Future revision of Australia ICOMOS Policy Practice Notes should consider this aspect.

7. Australia ICOMOS should comment in situations such as that of Wedge and Grey outlined here where the WA Government decision to proceed to management planning without completing a heritage assessment is completely at odds with Burra Charter principles.

8. The National Heritage Listing for RNP should be revised to better acknowledge the historic layers of meaning in the park, including the shack settlements.
Conclusion

The shack settlements established around the coast and waterways of Australia in the middle of the twentieth century reflected a distinct and simple weekend recreation escape for working people that is now mostly lost, along with the shacks themselves. The few that remain are often within public lands, such as national parks, where they can appear as unexplained anomalies to bush-walkers and ‘selfie-equipped’ day trippers. They are also managed by government land agencies under pressure to ‘normalise’ these public landscapes, but with fewer and fewer resources to do so. To do the remaining shack communities justice we need to use dynamic management tools to deal with the complexity and the opportunities to meaningfully retain these rare and fragile places.

The two shack community case studies presented in this paper have different current status; one has its heritage values recognised, while in the other, the state government is stalling the progression of heritage recognition while introducing damaging policies. Both of these examples ultimately need management that respects the social heritage values held by both the public and directly associated communities—a dynamic and more ‘three dimensional’ cultural landscape approach that through agreement leads to engagement, trust, and ultimately a generational transfer of responsibility. A genuine move to this approach by public lands management agencies will see the resolution of differing quietly contested values via the common ground of landscape.

References


Ashley, G 2017b, Royal National Park Coastal Cabins Communities Strategic Advice, report prepared in association with Alistair Henchman SAJE Consulting for RNP Coastal Cabins Protection League.

Ashley, G 2019, Wedge Shack Settlement Heritage Policies, for the Wedge Island Protection Association.


Godden Mackay Logan 2008, Royal National Park Coastal Cabins Communities State Heritage Register Nomination, for the RNP Coastal Cabins Protection League.


**Endnote**

1. The Kosciuszko National Park Huts Conservation Strategy 2005 (GML 2005) led by the author, identified the importance of social heritage values generally and the importance of some huts marking paths and routes that started as Aboriginal routes, became miners and pastoralists routes, and more recently those of bush walkers. This ‘cultural landscape value’ was used as a criterion for potential reconstruction following total destruction in the bush fires of 2003.