CULTURAL HERITAGE: STEREOTYPES AND REALITIES

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Introduction
Ten years ago at an ICOMOS meeting in Alice Springs members looked at the Alice Springs Telegraph Station and considered the fact that evidence of what was perhaps the most important dimension of the significance of that site had been destroyed.

As well as being a telegraph station, the site was for three decades ‘The Bungalow’ – a place where part Aboriginal children taken from their mothers were institutionalised in an official effort to have them grow up as whites rather than Aborigines. It was a program which was a central part of government solutions to the ‘Aboriginal problem’ between 1912 and about 1964. ‘The Bungalow’ was not the only place used in this way, but it was one of the most important.

In 1980 when ICOMOS members saw The Bungalow, otherwise known as the Alice Springs Telegraph Station, the site spoke evocatively of the overland telegraph, but there was no apparent clue to that other dimension of the history of the site. That was a great pity. I am happy to say that there has since been some rectification and the displays at the site now do refer to ‘The Bungalow’ era. However, the physical appurtenances of the site which would have shown it as The Bungalow have been erased for ever, at least for the practical purposes of presentation and interpretation.

Subjective judgments about presentation
That sad state of affairs was by no means the unique result of those years before the widespread understanding and adoption of the Venice/Burra Charter, when arbitrary and subjective judgments were made about the historical period to which a site should be ‘restored’.

In this process stereotyped images about the history and importance of sites prevailed over realities which might have been ascertained by a study of the evidence. Often, and I suspect that this happened in the case of the Alice Springs Telegraph Station, stereotypes were preferred over realities because the realities might have been uncomfortable or inconvenient to site managers. Often, the site managers thought that the visiting public might be nervous about the reality, and might stay away from the site as a result. Conversely, the cosy stereotype often made for a stronger tourist attraction.

Theoretically, those bad old days are behind us, at least so far as the built environment is concerned. I say theoretically, because I suspect that there still beats in many breasts a yearning to be free of the constraints of the Burra Charter, a yearning for the days when it was quite a proper ambition to reshape a site so that it conformed to and even evidenced an unrealistic historical stereotype which was more comfortable or saleable than an image based on reality.

I also limit my positive judgment of progress in this respect to the built environment because there is solid evidence that managers of sites, which are regarded as part of the national estate for their natural values, still prefer the stereotype to the reality.

Wilderness stereotypes can obscure history
Just as two decades ago the managers of historic sites yearned for the fashionable – grand homesteads, convict gaols, or cathedrals – today the natural area manager yearns for ‘wilderness’. There is no notion more trendy and popular in Australia today than ‘wilderness’. The central problem is that we don’t have very much, if any wilderness in Australia, in the sense of large land areas which have never been the scene for the activities of modern man.

Even a cursory study of our history and geography will show that there is not very much land in this country which has not been profoundly affected by European man, and there is certainly not very much land which has not been used by white men and women. The irony is that in places commonly thought of as ‘wilderness’ those human uses were often sustained, ingenious, and very important to our history. That fact does not stop such places being described as wilderness, and it does not stop management proposals being developed out of the stereotype rather than from a basis of objective study of historic and geographic reality.

Wherever wilderness is said to exist there is a cry for its strict preservation, and invariably large allocations of funds are made for its better management. In the process, history is often obscured or obliterated. Much of the difficulty is caused by the adversary situation which seems to be an inevitable part of the process of securing the reservation of large areas of relatively unspoiled land. The advocates of reservation are compelled to put the natural values as high...
Coronation Hill, March 1990. Uranium was discovered here on Coronation Day, 1953. Shortly afterwards the mountain was mined during a phase of intensive exploration and mining activity. That phase is an important theme in the history of what is now Kakadu Stage Three.

and as intact as they can, which is a perfectly legitimate tactic in the circumstances. However, these advocates become prisoners of their own rhetoric, and find themselves in the position where to be consistent they must even after reservation extol the natural values and ignore the human ones.

Incidentally and by way of example, I believe that the adversary process in relation to Kakadu Stage Three has led to the serious overstatement of the conservation values of Coronation Hill and to the disregard of the significant history of that locality. Perhaps too, part of the difficulty is due to what I suspect has long been a fact – that advocates for the natural environment are much more effective in the arena of controversy than are the advocates for the historic environment.

Promoters boost the wilderness values of tourist destinations and ignore other dimensions of significance. Parks and other natural area managers who find that they don’t have a pristine wilderness to manage often set about trying to create one. Thus, history in wilderness places is commonly, or even usually, denied – just as The Bungalow was denied at the Alice Springs Telegraph Station.

Such denials are a tragic eradication of our past in a frantic rush to gratify the present day mania to satisfy a new romantic idiom. It’s an idiom which speaks of unused, unspoiled tracts, peopled perhaps by a few Aboriginal noble savages living in harmony with nature. The tragedy is deepened by the fact that the places in which the denials happen are often very heavily used by tourists. Those tourists are thereby being deprived of the fullest possible visitor experience. Worse, the denial frustrates the operation of an essential mechanism through which people might otherwise achieve a better understanding of the development of our society.

I have only a little time, so I am going to rely on just one example to illustrate my point. I hope that it will be a striking example. It certainly is an important one because this year the Kakadu National Park will be visited by about a quarter of a million people.

The Kakadu example

Despite the spending of many millions of dollars on Kakadu’s management in recent years, very few of those visitors will take away from Kakadu any notion that the ‘wilderness’ they have just seen is in fact one of Australia’s great historic places, redolent of many of the major themes which have shaped the whole of our country.

Kakadu is a registered part of the National Estate, and a World Heritage site. The citations which support these registrations refer to the natural values of the
area, to its archaeological values, and to its special value as a living place for Aborigines.

**Kakadu's cultural values**

I would never denigrate these values, but what I want to argue here is that the place has other values too. They are historical values, and they are very important ones. Their exposition could teach us just as much about the history of Australia since 1788 as the prehistoric sites in the park teach about Australia's prehistory. Their revelation could do much to enhance the quality of the Kakadu visitor experience.

My central proposition to this conference is that Kakadu illustrates the tendency of site managers, especially managers of 'wilderness' areas, to be selective in what is conserved and presented.

Any record of recent human activity confronts and contradicts the precious notion of wilderness. There is therefore a great temptation to suppress any evidence that there ever was any activity by modern man. In this way stereotypes are perpetuated and entrenched and history is rewritten.

To support my contention that this history is not being paid due respect in the Kakadu case I need merely cite the absence of any attempt at its detailed exposition at the main park visitor centre; the paucity of attention given to historical matters in the park's current management plan; and the lack of detailed reference to it in the main official popular publication entitled *Kakadu: A World Heritage of Unsurpassed Beauty* by no less responsible a person than the former Director of the Australian National Parks and Wildlife Service, Dr. Derrick Ovington (AGPS 1986).

This lack of attention to history is in stark contrast with the drama and importance of the great events which have occurred in the Kakadu region over the past century. Without a knowledge of those events we cannot understand Kakadu today.

**Exploration and buffalo shooting**

Buffalo shooters settled in the region from about 1890, but even before this the people and places of the region had been influenced by historical events. Passing European navigators from the seventeenth century and perhaps even earlier; Maecassans with steel tools, tobacco, and alcohol; and British soldiers on Coburg Peninsula had all made impacts which percolated from the coasts down into the Kakadu region.

Buffalo and other feral animals left by the soldiers spread rapidly, and the availability of buffalo had already altered Aboriginal hunting and gathering patterns before permanent white settlement began in the region. Aboriginal languages, material culture, and the Aboriginal world view had already changed profoundly by the time of Leichhardt's passage in 1845.

The first white buffalo hunters stalked their prey on foot, but yields from this technique were poor. From about 1890 hunting methods were greatly refined by Paddy Cahill, who shot from horseback. He shot to cripple rather than instantly kill the buffalo. He relied on well trained horses to fearlessly gallop alongside the buffalo, and then to unerringly jump in the right direction once the wounding shot had been fired. By this means many animals could be shot during a continuous chase.

**Aboriginal involvement in economic activity**

Cahill and those who copied his methods also relied on Aboriginal labour. Some Aboriginal men were employed as shooters, but most were engaged to follow the white shooters on foot, to finish off the stricken animals, and then to skin them. The skins were then carried back to a central camp on pack horses. Aboriginal women then trimmed and cured the hides, and packed them in readiness for river and sea transport to Darwin.

For fifty years until World War Two there were never less than a dozen shooters' camps in Kakadu, each one led by several white men and with perhaps dozens of Aborigines attached. Some of the Aborigines were local Gagadju and Mailli, but many others came from the recesses of Arnhem Land to work for the shooters. Their reward was food, tobacco, and sometimes alcohol. They were willing, even anxious to be partners with the whites in a seasonal and semi-nomadic extension of their traditional society and economy.

Buffalo shooting for hides declined in the 1950s, and buffalo numbers increased to plague proportions. Some were shot for pet meat, but numbers continued to increase until extermination programs recently began as part of disease control and park management programs.

**Early mining**

Contemporaneously with the buffalo shooting mining activity was occurring throughout the region. As early as the 1880s prospectors were roaming eastward from the major mining districts along the telegraph line. Mining was actually conducted well within what is now the Kakadu National Park before 1900.

Prospecting and mining created many more opportunities for contact, and again Aborigines were attracted to areas of white and Chinese activity. They worked for the whites for tobacco, food, and alcohol, and from the Chinese they got opium as well. From the Chinese they also got leprosy; from the whites, venereal diseases. These introductions help explain the extinction of some entire language groups, and
the drastic population decline of others. One authority (Keen) estimates that the Aboriginal population in the area between the Adelaide and East Alligator Rivers declined from over 2,000 to about 80 between 1880 and 1920.

In the 1920s the Yemelba gold mine was opened up. In 1933 the adventurer Francis Birtles floated a company and developed the mine in quite a sophisticated way. It was the first mine in the Top End to be serviced by aircraft. Today evocative relics remain at Yemelba, just off the Kakadu Highway, but they are not mentioned anywhere in the park’s presentation program, and the access track is posted with signs prohibiting entry. Is this historic site a contradiction and an embarrassment to those who would prefer Kakadu to be thought of as ‘wilderness’?

During the Depression years prospectors combed the whole region, assisted by government ration handouts and sustenance payments of one shilling per day. These prospectors quickly noted the ability of some Aborigines to find rocks and stones similar to samples, or to take the white men into country of a certain description. The Aborigines also helped to gather much needed supplementary bush tucker. Again, the Aborigines were willing collaborators - not mere endurers of a new historical sequence imposed by whites.

Pastoral and agricultural settlement
Pastoral and agricultural settlement had in the meantime begun, tentatively from the 1870s, but notably and most enduringly at Oenpelli under Paddy Cahill and at Goodparla under George Cook, both from the first years of the century, and at Gumatj under Joe Callinan from 1934. In the 1950s Mudginberri and Munmally were established. Pastoralism was still being carried on in the region well after the establishment of the National Park from 1979.

Forestry was another land use in the Kakadu region. Chinese timber getters roamed the area in the 1880s, and in the 1930s they established a sawmill at Nourlangie. This was taken over by whites after the war.

Missionaries
Missionary activity began at Kapalga in 1900 but was soon abandoned. It was revived at Oenpelli in 1925 when Paddy Cahill’s station was handed over to the Anglican Church. Tobacco was used to entice people into the mission, but the issue of tobacco was suddenly stopped in 1940. The result was that Aboriginal people who had come into Oenpelli from hundreds of kilometres around moved away from the mission to locations where they could get tobacco.

This migration took people whose home country was central Arnhem Land as far afield as Darwin, Pine Creek, Katherine, and even beyond.

The Koolpin Gorge area, Kakadu Stage Three, viewed from an abandoned mine. The 1950s uranium miners opened access tracks to the area which were later used by recreational visitors. Water tank in foreground was originally a buoy for the Darwin harbour boom, designed to keep out enemy shipping during World War II.
World War Two
Their movement was accelerated by government and military action just before and during the war. Aborigines found in the bush were encouraged or compelled to come into control and labour camps where they could be prevented from making contact with the prospective Japanese invader and where their labour could be exploited in support of the war effort.

Postwar mining
Mining and pastoral activity revived after the war. Some of the miners noted that they saw no Aborigines in the South Alligator headwaters region when they prospected and mined that area for uranium from 1953.

New economic base for Aborigines
They should not have been surprised, because the Aboriginal people of that country were still clustered close to the white settlements along the railway line or were at the new government welfare settlements. They were awaiting the revival of white activity in the Kakadu region before going back to their country, preferring by this time to live in a post-traditional economy attached to white people rather than in a traditional hunting and gathering economy.

However, that is not to say that their attachment to their country had evaporated, or that they were not fulfilling their ceremonial obligations toward their country.

They did in fact return to their country once white economic activity resumed. Now they had more choices. As well as the long established buffalo shooting industry, the pastoral stations and the mission there were now crocodile shooters, tourist safari operators, and much wealthier and more sophisticated miners.

New awareness of region
All the while the region was becoming better known to the outside world. Improved access to and from the region was being developed. The first agitation for a national park in the area came from mining interests, and finally it was the pressure for large scale uranium mining which had as its concomitant the reservation of a large scale national park.

Uranium mining at Nabarlek and Ranger began in the late 1970s, and of course the competing demands for further mining and conservation in the area today poses one of our great unresolved national questions. I venture no comment about this, except to point out that historically it was the creation of better access to the region by miners from the 1950s which enabled the region to be seen and enjoyed by those who now clamour for its strict reservation.

Historical significance
That was a grossly simplistic overview of Kakadu's recent history. I haven't the time here to argue the significance of all this history to the region and to Australia as a whole. I hope though that much of the significance will be self evident. However, I must elucidate just one dimension of this significance.

Special significance of Aboriginal accommodation in Kakadu
Since they recognised the inevitability and the permanence of the white invasion from 1788, Aboriginal Australians have been seeking a union of their lives with those of white Australians. They have wanted an accommodation, on terms that would not mean extermination or assimilation, but would mean the preservation of their own identity and the development of new ways of life which would bear the imprint of their own aspirations.

Kakadu is one of the few places in Australia where that accommodation has finally been reached. Surely it is essential that everyone who visits Kakadu should be given the chance of understanding why that is so.

Places which evidence history
Throughout Kakadu there are places which could tell that story and many others. My contention is that the
managers of Kakadu and its visitors cannot really fully understand or fully enjoy the region unless this history is presented along with the other remarkable features of this superbly interesting and diverse area.

All values should be presented
To call Kakadu and many places like it ‘wilderness’ is to denigrate and detract from the full range of values which such areas invariably have. The terminology blinds people to the historical values which are invariably found in wilderness areas just as they are found almost everywhere else.

My proposition to this conference is that as professionals we have an obligation to do our best to see that the values of our heritage places are presented realistically, holistically and honestly, not selectively to enhance a desired or more comfortable stereotype.

We at least pay lip service to this ideal in the Burra Charter. We should be striving to achieve the ideal not only at cultural sites but at natural sites too. In fact, I hope we soon stop categorising sites in that way because there are very few, if any, sites that don’t represent a generous mix of both the human and the natural.

The song of the land
In conclusion I say that we would do well to remember the Aboriginal axiom that all land has a ‘song’ which is the story of people in that land. If the song is lost that land becomes a barren waste without life and without meaning.

By all means let us help people to see the beauty of the land, but let us also help them to hear its song.

References