CULTURAL LANDSCAPES - THEIR SCOPE AND THEIR RECOGNITION

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INTRODUCTION

Cultural landscapes are the subject of growing concern among heritage bodies and the broader community. This is reflected in the nomination of cultural landscapes for entry in the Register of the National Estate, as much as among heritage bodies and the broader community. This has a responsibility under the Australian Heritage and protection. The Australian Heritage Commission has a responsibility under the Australian Heritage Commission Act of 1975 to maintain and develop the Register of the National Estate as a listing of those places in the natural and cultural environment of Australia, of significance to present and future generations. In order to make the Register as comprehensive as possible, we need to develop mechanisms for the identification and assessment of cultural landscapes alongside other places of cultural significance, such as buildings and sites.

In this paper we propose to discuss the concept of cultural landscapes and outline their scope, including Aboriginal landscapes, an area not normally dealt with when discussing cultural landscapes. We will also touch on work the Commission has done to date in the area of recognition of cultural landscapes.

CULTURAL LANDSCAPES: THE CONCEPT AND ITS SCOPE

What is a cultural landscape?
The term “cultural landscape” is a geographer’s term. It is generally applied to those parts of the land surface which have been significantly modified by human activity, to distinguish them from natural or wilderness landscapes, with little or apparently no evidence of human intervention. This distinction is not clear-cut, for it implies both a common understanding of what “significantly modified” means as well as general agreement about what is or was natural. Human activity is not always visible or identifiable to those without an understanding of the history of the area. Historical inquiry has shown that certain landscapes described and treated as “natural” are in fact modified; particular examples are the effects of 40,000 years of Aboriginal occupation on various parts of the Australian environment (e.g. fire burning and the resultant effects on vegetation) which prehistoric research is increasingly clarifying, and supposed “wilderness” areas which have in fact been modified by earlier forestry, mining or open-range grazing practices, for example, Wilson’s Promontory, Victoria. At what point along a spectrum of modification we identify an area as being a cultural landscape is open to debate, but it is important to keep in mind that the seemingly natural environment at the time of European settlement was no more natural than the landscape left behind in Europe, just as it is important to realize that most newly identified “wilderness” areas have evidence of human activity and modification.

Another way of understanding the distinction between natural and cultural landscapes is through the idea that the study of cultural landscapes focuses on the relationship between people and place, and the patterns created by ongoing human use, rather than, or in addition too, the operation of non-human, or bio-physical systems. Landscape is seem primarily as a cultural artifact, consisting of the tangible remains left on the land by present and earlier cultures.

History Around Us
Cultural landscape is also essentially an historical concept: its study has built on the notion that the history of an area provides the key to understanding its current physical shape and layout. Historical associations and events, the impact of government legislation, the application of various technologies to the land, the past ordering of social and cultural life, these and other factors which have changed the look of the landscape can be studied through the documentary evidence normally available to historians, as well as through the analysis of the material forms of particular landscapes. Features in the landscape such as fencelines and road networks, clusters of farm buildings and tree plantings, and named features, can tell the story of past settlement practices: so too can the less visible evidence of ridge and furrow ploughing, Aboriginal campsites, quarries, middens and art sites. In Australia, this approach to our historic environment has long been practised by the historical geographer, Denis Jeans. In his various published works (see reference list), Jeans has envisaged the ordinary Australian landscape as an important historical and archaeological record of our past, and one that is best studied through both written and material evidence.

Aboriginal Landscapes
In many of our cultural landscapes, human modifications are very evident and have changed the appearance of the landscape. One exception is landscapes which are important to Aboriginal people, where the relationship between people and place is very strong, but meaning is attached to natural or topographical rather than humanly-modified landscape features. It should be stressed that this, to us, natural landscape is to traditional Aborigi-
Chambers Pillar, N.T. This landmark in a vast flat landscape is the central cultural focus to Aborigines as a sacred site, and to Europeans for its exploration graffiti.

Australia a cultural landscape, having been created by ancestral beings in the Dreaming. Every feature of the landscape has a name and a story attached to it, explaining how it came to be. These cultural landscapes are of great importance to Aboriginal people, and part of their spiritual being, and are a significant aspect of Australia’s cultural heritage, particularly in those areas where a full understanding of this sacred landscape is maintained.

ASSESSING SIGNIFICANCE

Cultural landscapes can be approached and interpreted in a number of ways which are helpful in identifying and assessing the significance of particular landscapes which may merit recognition and protection. The examples given below to illustrate possible approaches to the identification of significant cultural landscapes.

Historic

An historical approach to landscape appreciation touches at least two areas of the Commission’s concerns: it permits unsightly landscapes to be identified as having heritage significance; and it allows for a fuller recognition of all the cultural elements, even though these may not previously have been rigourously documented for a place. Nominations for landscapes have been frequently couched in aesthetic or scenic terms; and historical documentation has in the past often been overlooked or, where provided, poorly linked to the physical evidence. For many modified landscapes, the history of the area can provide the key to understanding the existing physical forms, and is thus the basis for the process of rigorous description and assessment of significance which is essential to the nomination process. This process should pay attention to the less visible, archaeological evidence, as well as more obvious and dramatic features, and should chart changes within the landscape over a long period - including where possible, the prehistoric and Aboriginal significance of an area.

Few nominations for plain or “ugly” landscapes have been received by the Commission; yet many historically significant landscapes are not visually attractive, e.g. mining and other industrial areas. For the depth and variety of Australian landscapes to be adequately represented in the Register, we need to adopt an approach which distinguishes historic from aesthetic and scenic qualities of an area.

A dramatic mining landscape; many historic areas are now being re-mined, and evidence of early mining destroyed. Madam Berry West mine tailings, Creswick area, Vic.

In particular, the national estate values of rural cultural landscapes have been distorted by the tendency in the past of heritage bodies to group these landscapes with natural and scenic landscapes for assessment purposes. One of the factors contributing to this problem is that the historical forces which have changed the appearance of rural landscapes in Australia are poorly understood (e.g. technological change, government regulation and farm management practices).
Survey techniques have been developed which are appropriate to the characteristics of particular types of cultural landscapes found in Australia: for example, Robert Melnick’s work on rural historic districts in the American National Parks system; and Chris Tassell’s recent study of rural cultural landscapes in Tasmania. Hopefully, other possible approaches will be outlined during this conference.

Social
Social significance arises because present communities can and do have strong feelings about particular cultural landscapes: as home landscapes tied up with local family and community history; as landscape settings contributing to a special sense of place; or as recreational settings which are the focus of special and long held attachments of people to place (for example, the Howqua Hills Historic Area, Vic., the Tasman Peninsula, Tas., The Three Sisters, Blue Mountains, NSW, the Lanyon Bowl, ACT).

The problem with finding tangible indicators of social significance make this type of significance in general difficult to assess. The Commission has recently begun to examine social significance more closely in order to better assess such significance for the Register of the National Estate. Key elements are the strength of the association between community and place over time, and the degree of public recognition of that association. Elements such as continuity of settlement or recreational use can suggest community affinity with and attachment to place; it can also be related to the present meanings of a place to which values are attached, e.g. knowledge of past events and people creating a sense of belonging, and attachment to place or locality. Such associative values may change over time and therefore may need periodic review for national estate significance.

A further difficulty for the Commission in assessing social significance for landscape areas is that landscape is a vital entity which is subject to constant change, and this can affect national estate values. Hobby-farming and gentrification (which have an impact on the local community and land use), and the reservation of areas for regeneration as "natural" landscapes, or even "wilderness", can change the character of our rural cultural landscapes.

A different but important type of social significance is that held by traditional Aboriginal groups for the landscape. In areas where such traditional values are no longer known, Aboriginal place names provide important documented historical indications of past social significance. Recent surveys of Aboriginal place names in the Northern Territory and South Australia are in recognition of this important source of historical data regarding the cultural landscape, a source which is dying out with traditional living patterns.

Aesthetic
An aesthetic approach to landscape is based on sensory impressions of the landscape; it is the total image a viewer forms of a landscape and is related to the visual stimulus an observer feels when seeing a landscape. The aesthetic experience of landscape is a changing one, which may be influenced by the viewer’s perspective, or time of day, or season. Aesthetics is also undoubtedly a cultural construct. The concept of landscape as scene has come to us from 18th century landscape painting where the term itself originated during a period when an aesthetic appreciation of one’s surroundings was very much in vogue with the European upper classes.
The aesthetic view is important as one layer of meaning which a landscape may hold, but is not always necessarily in itself a broad enough criterion on which to assess the heritage values of cultural landscapes. While the aesthetic values alone may justify the listing of a particular landscape in the Register, there will usually be historical, social, or natural components which deserve consideration.*

CRITERIA AND LISTING

The National Trusts in Australia have identified cultural landscapes as being worthy of listing for some time. State heritage legislation can in some cases effect protection. At the federal level the Register of the National Estate provides recognition and, to a degree, protection against Commonwealth actions which may adversely affect the heritage values of registered cultural landscapes.

The Register is an alerting and educational inventory of places that have significance for future generations as well was for the present community. Under the Australian Heritage Commission Act 1975, the Commission is responsible for compiling the Register, which involves identifying and assessing places suitable for entry in the Register.

The Commission has specific criteria which it uses to assess the suitability of places for the Register. These are some of the criteria which may apply to cultural landscapes and which are considered during the assessment process:

- Criterion 1.4: Importance for their association with events, developments, or cultural phases which have had a significant role in the history of the nation, state, region or community, e.g.Central Goldfields, Vic.
- Criterion 2.2: Importance in exhibiting the distinctive characteristics of a way of life, philosophy, custom, process, land-use, function, design or technique no longer practical, in danger of being lost, or of exceptional interest, e.g. Lanyon Bowl, ACT
- Criterion 3.2: Importance in representing the range of activities in the Australian environment (industry, a way of life, customs, process, land use, design or technique), e.g. Tinderies eucalyptus still area, NSW
- Criterion 4.2: Importance as a humanly-modified landscape or townscape with particular historical value, e.g. Shearers' Strike Camp, Longreach, Qld
- Criterion 6: Importance for cultural or social associations or as the focus of strong cultural or social sentiment, e.g. Parliamentary Triangle, Canberra; Pennyweight Flat Children's Cemetery, Castlemaine, Vic

The Commission is currently working on the integration of historic themes and the Criteria. Chris McConville's landscapes study for the Commission on the Creswick Goldfields Area is an important step in this direction. The Commission has also in the past undertaken work on historic gardens, and is about to commission some work on Honour Avenues.

The Commission believes that entering cultural landscapes in the Register is important for the following reasons:

- listing would have an educational impact and encourage the public to value cultural landscapes as part of its cultural heritage, and to consider the past and future of familiar landscapes;
- the Register is a resource for planners and listing would mean that the heritage significance of a particular landscape is taken into account in the planning processes; and
- identification of the major elements of significance during the listing process would assist cultural resource managers with the management of cultural landscapes.

CULTURAL LANDSCAPES AND THE REGISTER

Most of the landscapes currently entered in the Register have been listed for their natural or scenic values, even though many of these landscapes also have significant historical and cultural values. The Register contains almost no rural landscapes which are recognised predominantly for their historic or cultural character and values. The emphasis on scenic landscapes and values is partly a result of the visual assessment processes that have dominated landscape assessment over the past decade. The Commission is attempting to develop assessment processes which address in an integrated way the full range of national estate values landscapes may have.

A number of key areas need to be addressed by the Commission and nominators before the listing of cultural landscapes can proceed on a larger scale:

- agreed procedures for assessing cultural landscapes need to be put in place. This problem could be partly

* The scope of cultural landscapes was discussed in relation to the slides of the following examples: Willandra Lakes, NSW - natural, prehistoric, pastoral Mumbulla Mountain, NSW - sacred Aboriginal landscape Chambers Pillar, NT - sacred and historic Tasman Peninsula, Tas. - historic, natural, aesthetic Lanyon Bowl, ACT - historic, social, aesthetic Pennyweight Flat Children's Cemetery, Vic. - historic, social Central Goldfields, Vic. - historic, social, aesthetic.
Landscape of the imagination; the remnants of a remarkable tourist complex incorporating rainforest gardens and romantically inspired structures dating from the 1920s and 1930s and patronised by American servicemen during the World War 2, Paronella Recreation Park, QLD.

solved by making more use of the procedures for assessing places with cultural significance set out in the Australia ICOMOS Burra Charter and its Guidelines. There is also a need to develop community-based assessment methodologies which are not expert-driven.

- landscapes which have both natural and cultural values need to be assessed in an integrated way;
- nominations need to contain more information about the history and cultural attributes of landscapes so that assessment can proceed;
- boundaries need to reflect closely the national estate values of a particular landscape: historic settlement patterns, current landuse and community networks, and other social and cultural factors may need to be considered in conjunction with physical characteristics which may define landscape entities;
- integrity: landscapes are constantly changing through natural and human processes. For cultural landscapes with predominantly historic significance, integrity is related to whether or not the essential character of the historical period is retained by the landscape. For other facets of significance, especially those which depend on the maintenance of particular communities or land use, significance may need to be reassessed periodically.

The Commission will continue to refine its approach to identifying and assessing cultural landscapes for inclusion in the Register, and to do this in a way which recognises the full range of cultural landscapes and their various facets of significance.

REFERENCES


Australian Heritage Commission 'Background Note' on Cultural Landscapes, available from the Commission.


