Editorial
Connecting cultures and continents: the heritage of routes and journeys

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Abstract

This article introduces the concept of heritage routes, one of four categories of world heritage established to date. It presents the author’s observation as a longstanding member of the ICOMOS International Committee on Cultural Routes (CIIC), providing critical perspectives on the concept itself and how we are moving forward on understanding the diverse aspects of cultural routes in different cultural and regional contexts. It also considers the issues and challenges of working with this type of heritage, both globally and in Australian heritage practice, which are elaborated in the articles that follow. Recent research trends are analysed, and potential areas of future research identified.

Introduction

The idea that cultural routes make up the connective web of the world’s heritage, tying regions and empires together, is an engaging concept presented by Michael Taylor in his paper in this issue. In Taylor’s opinion, they represent a qualitative change in the concept of heritage conservation and are increasingly considered important aspects of world heritage, as reflected in their recognition as a category for world heritage listing in 2005.

This view is also expressed in the ICOMOS Charter on Cultural Routes, adopted in 2008 at the ICOMOS General Assembly in Quebec, Canada, whose authors claim to ‘introduce… a qualitative new approach to the theory and practice of conservation of the cultural heritage’ (ICOMOS 2008).

The idea of cultural routes followed behind the adoption by the World Heritage Committee in 1992 of ‘cultural landscape’ as a new category for recognising world heritage properties. While the concept of cultural routes was under discussion from at least 1994, it was not until 2005 that the new concept of ‘heritage route’ was ratified by the World Heritage Committee as one of the categories recognised for inscription on the World Heritage List (along with sites, monuments, cultural landscapes, towns and canals (UNESCO 2005).

Taken together, these new categories of cultural landscapes and cultural routes have considerably broadened approaches to world heritage identification and listing, moving beyond the monumental, or site-based approach, implicit in the use of the earlier categories, to a far greater interest in and recognition of the diversity of global cultures, especially Indigenous cultures, who often lack monumental structures (Harrison 2013:128; West 2012). Rather, this living Indigenous cultural heritage is shaped by dynamic systems, cultural processes and exchanges, often embedded in landscape, or connected areas of land and sea, with strong intangible elements that give sense and meaning to the whole entity. It also requires new approaches to heritage practice which encompass a wider range of disciplines and areas of professional practice, particularly those interested in recording living cultures and intangible heritage.
Initially, cultural routes were considered as ‘a specific, dynamic type of cultural landscape’, associated with ‘population movements, encounters, cultural exchanges and cross fertilisation, taking place in both space and time’ (ICOMOS 1994). Early interest in the concept was triggered by the inscription in the World Heritage List of the Routes of Santiago de Compostela in Spain in 1993, and those of France in 1998, reflecting the cultural exchanges of the pilgrim’s journey throughout the Middle Ages in Europe. This important notion of cultural exchanges taking place across vast spans of time and space, has become a distinguishing feature of cultural routes, and a means of differentiating it from the already accepted idea of cultural landscapes.

Other key features identified were that it is the sum of the parts that create the heritage route, rather than individual elements in isolation. It was also stressed that routes must combine exchanges with journeys, as compared with those that only represent a physical act of travel, such as railway lines. The route would also have to be significant to human kind in some way, even if the significance was no longer current, as for example in the Silk Road, which at its full historical extent traversed more than twenty-five countries with twenty spoken languages (ICOMOS 1994; 2007).

The definition of a cultural route or itinerary was given further clarity in the ICOMOS Charter on Cultural Routes ratified in 2008 (ICOMOS 2008). This definition is quoted at length by Taylor in his paper in this issue, so I will not quote it here. Rather, it is interesting to note in the rational for the concept of cultural routes a return to the early expression by UNESCO of post-war ideas of world peace and programs to rebuild a community of nations. In the preamble to the charter, it is asserted that cultural routes offer ‘an exceptional setting for a culture of peace based on the ties of shared history as well as the tolerance, respect, and appreciation of cultural diversity’ – a theme that has also been taken up in some of the recent CIIC meetings and symposiums, notably the meeting at Ise in Japan in 2009 (ICOMOS 2008, 2009).

The 2008 charter also restated the case for distinguishing cultural routes from cultural landscapes, highlighting the dynamic character of routes and need for a holist approach to researching and recording the diversity of natural and cultural elements and values. Already, in 1998, the Committee on Cultural Routes and Itineraries (CIIC) had been established in ICOMOS family of International Scientific Committees (ISCs), with administrative support from the Spanish National Committee of ICOMOS. To date, world heritage inscriptions in the cultural routes category reflect the heritage of Spain (El Camino de Santiago de Compostela, listed in 1993, with additional areas in 2007) and its former colonial possession of New Spain, now Mexico (El Camino Real de Tierra Adentro, the Royal Inland Road, or Silver Route, listed in 2010). While the sacred sites and pilgrimage routes of the Kii Mountain Range in Japan have also recently been inscribed as world heritage, this property was listed as a cultural landscape rather than a cultural route (UNESCO 2004). Work is underway on the Chinese section of the Silk Road, but this is not yet reflected in World Heritage listing (ICOMOS 2007). Clearly, there are many more cultural landscapes recognised on the World Heritage List, with 82 inscribed to date, as well as the many research papers available on the World Heritage Centre website (UNESCO 2013).

Meanwhile Australia ICOMOS has gone in a different direction by setting up the National Scientific Committee on Cultural Routes and Cultural Landscapes, acknowledging differences but at the same time recognising the strong linkages between the concepts and common problems and issues related to their management (Australia ICOMOS 2013).

This is first of two issues of Historic Environment that will critically examine the concept of cultural route as a relatively new world heritage category which is still largely untested in its application to global heritage practice. To date there has been relatively limited discussion of the scope of the concept, even though it is now twenty years since the Pilgrim Routes of Santiago de Compostela were first recognised as world heritage. There has also been only limited discussion of its application beyond the archetypal routes of Europe and its former colonial empires: routes based on religion (pilgrimage); trade (silk, salt, slaves); and military conquest (crusades, imperial roads of conquest). As yet, little attention has been paid to the trading systems of the Indigenous or maritime-based societies that are prevalent in the UNESCO region of Asia and the Pacific, of which Australia is part. There has also been little discussion
of less tangible routes, such as the ancestor tracks of Indigenous Australia. Many Indigenous communities are now involved in collaborative research to document their heritage places and landscapes, such as the project presented by Diana James in her paper in this issue. While much work remains to be done, papers included in these two issues present work done to date researching and documenting the heritage routes and journeys that have formed enduring, and often continuing, connections across the Australian continent and with the lands and seas of southeast Asia.

The research presented this issue of *Historic Environment* offers a perspective more than a decade on from the landmark Australia ICOMOS international conference, *Making Tracks: from point to pathway – the heritage of routes and journeys*, held at Alice Springs in the Northern Territory in 2001 and in 2002 published as an issue of *Historic Environment* (Australia ICOMOS 2002). The 2001 conference adopted a broad definition of cultural route or itinerary, as ‘a customary or regular line of travel for trade, social or cultural life, utilities, land management, tourism or other cultural purpose’. Interestingly, this definition is more comparable to that currently used by the European Institute of Cultural Routes, set up by the European Union to highlight themes across cultural landscapes and cultural routes that are meaningful in terms of European memory, history and cultural heritage (European Union 2013). Both definitions encompass the many different types of routes and journeys, at different scales and through distinctive geographical regions, as well as the layered values they often have for communities along the route.

The 2001 Australian conference considered heritage places ranging from historic roads, to long-distance pastoral and trade routes, to the ancestor tracks of Indigenous Australians which criss-cross the entire continent. The conference was outwardly-focussed, benefiting from the initial meetings and publications of the CIIC, with papers by international speakers on the Frankincense routes of the Middle East, Vietnam’s Highway No.1, and the China Silk Road (Australia ICOMOS 2001).

Subsequently in 2007, inspired by the *Preserving the Historic Road* conferences that have taken place at various locations in the United States over the last twelve years, a further Australia ICOMOS conference on the cultural routes theme focussed specially on historic roads, recognising new historical perspectives on how the automobile has shaped global society and culture. This conference resulted in a themed issue of *Historic Environment*, *Corrugations, the romance and reality of historic roads* (Australia ICOMOS 2007).

This issue of *Historic Environment* returns to the topic of cultural routes and itineraries to present an updated overview of current research and heritage practice.

The authors of the articles in this themed issue of *Historic Environment* have addressed a number of key issues and challenges related to cultural routes as follows:

- Concept of cultural route – how are we moving forward on understanding the diverse aspects of cultural routes?
- Identifying route connections with the Asia-Pacific region and beyond, across land and water
- Recognition of different types of routes related to cultural processes, activities and exchanges
- Understanding storied-routes, where cultural values are predominantly intangible, held by communities
- Working with communities to research and record cultural routes at all scales, local, continental, transnational; and
- Finding new approaches to the protection, management and interpretation of cultural routes.

Preparation of this issue has also been guided by the indicative themes and route examples included at Appendix 1. This work is offered as a preliminary inventory of heritage routes relating to the Australian continent and its regional connections.

The first article, by historic preservation specialist Michael Taylor, engages critically with how
we are moving forward in understanding the diverse aspects of cultural routes in different countries and regions throughout the world. Of particular interest is his snapshot of current research on different types of routes, for example, the designed automobile route, and different regions of the globe, including current research to record the routes connecting the ancient pre-Colombian empire of South America, the Qhapaq Nan, or Inca Road. He also addresses the many challenges in recording and protecting these cultural resources when faced with numerous threats, both human impacts and natural disasters. This insightful overview provides a useful context for situating the particular case study examples that follow.

Visual anthropologist, Diana James, presents her work, undertaken collaboratively with the elders, artists, dancers and singers of the Western Desert region of Western Australia, to document ‘songlines’ as living cultural routes. These are based on a web of oral Indigenous knowledge of country that maps places of significance. Understanding these storied-routes, where the cultural values are predominantly intangible, closely held by communities, requires researchers to work with communities over many years. In her article, Dr James outlines the project development, findings and challenges of this innovative approach to recognising a significant cultural route of the Australian desert.

The next article, by Sandy Blair and Nicholas Hall, explores the challenges of considering the extensive and interlocking maritime routes created through global trading networks over many centuries as cultural routes. The article examines a case study of the Macassan trepang trading route, an intercultural maritime route connecting the Indigenous communities of northern Australia to southeast Asia and China over many centuries. There is increasing interest in recognising and protecting the tangible and intangible heritage of these Macassan sea roads and ongoing cultural contacts. The article makes a case for considering this ancient trading route across land and water as a World Heritage cultural route and looks at some of the issues and challenges associated with this ambitious project.

As Michael Pearson points out, sea routes have thus far received little attention in terms of their heritage values. He too looks at some of the challenges in recording and documenting these types of routes and presents a case study of sea routes through the Great Barrier Reef off Australia’s Queensland coast to explore their significance to local communities, and more broadly, to Queensland and Australia.

Rosemary Kerr investigates the multiple layers of meaning, significance and cultural interactions along one of Australia’s most important transcontinental transport corridors, the Stuart Highway. It is at once an Australian legend and a strategic World War Two defence route. It was part of the popular overland travel route from Australia to London via Asia and the Middle East, known as the ‘Hippie Highway’. It is also a multi-layered communication route containing both the Overland Telegraph Line linking Australia to Britain, and ‘The Ghan’, the north-south railway link so-called because it followed an early Afghan Camel route. It is the route of the first crossing of the continent by early explorer, John McDouall Stuart, after whom the highway is named. And it was and continues to be a trading and ceremonial route for many Aboriginal people connected to this area. Kerr concludes that her approach emphasises the importance of a holistic assessment of all heritage elements and values for routes such as the Stuart Highway, in order to fully understand and interpret their cultural significance.

The Great Ocean Road along Victoria’s west coast was designed and purpose-built as a scenic travel route, following overseas models, for the newly popular motor car: it is also a war memorial and an iconic tourist attraction, with over seven million visits annually. In their article on the Great Ocean Road, Kirsty Altenburg and Luke James ponder the implications for the recognition and management of these different and sometimes conflicting heritage values. They also investigate the claims of the Great Ocean Road to be considered as a cultural route, with evidence of international cultural transference. However, they concluding that it is more properly considered as an historic road, with a range of significant heritage values important to local, regional and national communities.

The final article presents the findings of a research project on the Thai-Burma railway, built in 1942-43 by Allied prisoners of war and Asian labourers under Japanese command. While
nearly three-quarters of the original route has been demolished, significant archaeological remains are evident in the landscape and more importantly, in author Joan Beaumont’s view, its memory has progressively transcended national boundaries. Professor Beaumont investigates and presents the heritage of the railway, shaped not only by the Thais, on whose territory it remains, but also by cross-cultural links and interventions by other national groups with their own wartime memories. Yet, as Beaumont points out, much of the heritage remains fragile, and as the generation who experienced World War Two ages and dies, the future of the railway as a cultural route will be contingent on the emergence of new shared memories across its multi-national stakeholders with an interest in its commemoration and heritage.

The idea of a cultural route is an ambitious concept which focuses on strong elements of cultural exchange, both the tangible and intangible aspects, associated with particular routes of significant historical duration and geographic reach. Such routes link regions, continents and cultures over considerable time spans. The articles in this issue of_Historic Environment_demonstrate how cultural routes are important aspects of community heritage, in many different cultural contexts and scales, from local to global.

Working with cultural routes in the Asia-Pacific region has the potential to broaden our understanding of the application of this engaging concept in different cultural contexts, as well as strengthening global heritage practice in new and potentially fruitful areas and applications.

Appendix 1: Indicative themes and heritage routes of local to global significance

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<tr>
<th>Theme/story</th>
<th>Indicative examples of routes</th>
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<tr>
<td>1. Indigenous perspectives on routes</td>
<td>Djet (sea eagle), Gurripi (stingray) Yangamawuy (turtle hunter) Yambirrku (parrotfish) Blue Mud Bay</td>
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<td>Indigenous pathways and creation stories</td>
<td>Ngintaka Tjukurpa (Perentie Lizard Trail) Central Australia</td>
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<td>Indigenous trade and exchange, land and sea</td>
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<td>Indigenous Rights Movement</td>
<td>Wave Hill Walk-Off Route, Northern Territory</td>
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<td>Historic routes through Indigenous people’s country</td>
<td>Freedom Rides of 1964 and 1965, NSW</td>
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<td>Canning Stock Route, WA</td>
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<td>Birdsville and Strzelecki Track Area, SA, QLD</td>
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<td>2. Settler societies and colonial expansion</td>
<td>Old Great North Road, NSW</td>
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<td>Convict transportation and settlement</td>
<td>Canning Stock Route, WA</td>
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<td>Pastoral industries – long distant stock routes</td>
<td>Birdsville and Strzelecki Track Area, SA, QLD</td>
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<td>‘The Long Paddock’ – network of travelling stock routes around Australia</td>
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<td>Agricultural expansion</td>
<td>Old Great North Road, NSW</td>
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<td>Zig Zag Railway, Lithgow, NSW</td>
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<td>Mining industries</td>
<td>Overland walking route to the Victorian Goldfields, SA, VIC</td>
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<td>Mobile people and continental connections – layering along corridors, across themes</td>
<td>Northern South Australia mound springs/Overland Telegraph/Ghan Railway/National Stuart Highway, SA, NT, SE Asia, Europe</td>
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<td>Theme/story</td>
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<td>3. Leisure, touring and tourism</td>
<td>Growth of leisure, touring and tourism Great Ocean Road and Rural Environs, VIC Blue Mountains walking tracks, Six Foot Track, NSW Aviation Qantas Kangaroo Route linking Australia to Asia and Europe</td>
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<td>4. Beyond Borders Routes of significance to Australians on other people’s territory</td>
<td>Kokoda Track, Papua New Guinea Thai Burma Railway, Thailand, Myanmar (Burma) Routes extending beyond Australia South Sea Islander (Kanaka) Trade Maccasan trepang trade, northern Australia, Indonesia, China</td>
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**Source:** the information in this table is based on research by the author and reflects her views of what might go into a preliminary Australian inventory of heritage routes – though many of these will be of local, state or national heritage value rather than of Outstanding Universal Value. It is also informed by discussions over the last few years at the annual meetings of the Australia ICOMOS National Scientific Committee on Cultural Landscapes and Cultural Routes.

**References**


