Throughout Australia there are many examples of monuments either celebrating or commemorating events, wars, conflict and people. These places or sites, highlighted, by either a statue, plaque or cairn, give rise to curiosity, a sense of place and purpose, or represent a tangible link to the past. But what if you were standing in the middle of the desert, or in the thickness of the forests or on the windy peaks of the mountains? Would you find that link to your past there, would you see the monuments, the sites, the living earth? Would you see the subtle signs left by spiritual beings as they moved from one dimension to the other? This is the way we Aborigines see - this is what I see - for monuments are not intrinsic structures, reflecting human art forms or architectural styles. It is the landscapes, the canvas of mother nature, and it is within its presence that Aboriginal people reflect, ponder and become inspired.

This acknowledgment of Aboriginal people’s perspectives of themselves and their history hasn’t always been apparent to the average Australian. But it is changing. Over the past two years I have had the privilege of working closely on a project in Victoria. The project funded by the Australian Heritage Commission and undertaken by Megan Goulding in Aboriginal Affairs Victoria was called Aboriginal Historical Places. The project was aimed at identifying and documenting significant Aboriginal places from both archival and oral histories. Although this work is not necessarily unique in terms of academic investigations, it did highlight some interesting aspects of Aboriginal people’s perspectives of themselves and their history. Ten Aboriginal communities were involved in the project, which focused on two distinct areas, East Gippsland in Eastern Victoria and the Central Highlands north of Melbourne.

The people that Megan spoke with ranged from elders, women and men, Aboriginal people working within cultural heritage management and Administrators and staff of Aboriginal community organisations. Some of the work that the project was able to articulate was the concept of place and its associations be it spiritual, social or historical between indigenous people and their environment. One particular association I wish to highlight here is the spiritual. As Megan states in her report on the East Gippsland project, most of the information which emerged from her research fell under the theme of attachment to, or associations with, places which are known to precede contact. Among these are places where food was procured and sites where people are known to have camped either prior to, or after, contact. Also included are stories of spiritual places such as Dulagar (hairy men/women) territories. Megan also wrote that the location of Dulagar country was given by people still living in East Gippsland today and that the awareness of these spirit people is very high. This articulation and acknowledgment of indigenous people’s perception of landscapes reflecting or harbouring spirits is not just for scary campfire stories or legends. They are real, they are also tangible to us and they are our monuments. I think one of the main aspects of conserving and protecting these places and their meanings is for greater understanding and respect.

In closing I would just like to share with you a short piece I wrote some time ago for the Year of the Family. I think it will show you that the importance of monuments or ruins are not just for me stones and mortar.

I first went to Lake Condah Aboriginal Mission, near Portland in Western Victoria, as a volunteer on an archaeological excavation. I think one of the main reasons I went was to see for myself the place that holds so many memories for both my family and relatives of the Gunditjmara tribe, particularly my mother, who was one of the last Gunditjmara people born there.

There are many stories and histories which I have had the opportunity to finally hear about my past, my history and my identity as an Aboriginal person. Walking through the ruins of the mission and absorbing the atmosphere of the place it was easy to visualise the family huts, large playing field and running creek which borders the mission area. These images and stories borrowed from the childhood memories of my family came together in that one place and I felt for the first time that I had come home.

Although my childhood memories are of similar places such as welfare institutions and foster homes, the irony of the Mission is that it has finally become a place of cultural awakening and a sense of belonging.

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