HISTORIC LANDSCAPES:
A Comparison of the Attitudes of the Broader Community and Heritage Experts Towards Historic Landscape Conservation

by Rob Snelling Jan Schapper

Introduction

Historic landscapes are those landscapes which have been influenced by post-European settlement history. The identification, assessment and conservation of historic landscapes has traditionally been the role of heritage experts, both in Australia and throughout the world. These experts may represent only a small sector of the population. Yet despite this, it would appear that the broader community is appreciative of those aspects of historic landscapes which are conserved and protected. Often heritage experts are nominated by the broader community. For example, the National Trust of Australia regularly appoints expert panels and committees which represent a cross-section of the community. Although this is a necessary and fundamental procedure to ensure that the significance and value associated with a particular historic landscape is identified and ultimately conserved, it may unintentionally lead to a situation where the broader community's attitudes are not adequately represented or included in the conservation process. The study documented here compared the attitudes of heritage experts and those of the community towards historic landscape conservation.

There are two categories of landscape conservation studies which are undertaken by heritage experts. The first category contains regional heritage studies which deal with large scale landscapes, including natural landscapes and wilderness areas. For instance, Kakadu National Park in the Northern Territory and historic towns and regions such as Maldon in Victoria. The second category contains heritage studies which deal with individual places and sites. These places and sites often exist as historic properties that have been influenced by post-European settlement history. Such historic properties include botanic and historic gardens, for example Williamstown and Melbourne Royal Botanic Gardens, rural farms and pastoral properties such as Gulf Station, The Briars and Windmill Farm, and historic residential homesteads such as Como, Rippon Lea and Labassa.

In regional heritage studies, opportunities frequently exist for different community groups to put forward their opinions, values and attitudes. However, in the case of heritage studies which deal with individual places, it appears that the community may not be adequately consulted, or, in fact, represented at all.

The research focussed upon historic landscapes at the property level and was designed as a pilot study to identify gaps and similarities in the attitudes of heritage experts and members of the broader community with respect to conserving historic landscapes. Findings presented here may lead to further and more in-depth research, both in Victoria as well as in other states of Australia.

In this study, heritage experts include historians, archaeologists, engineers, architects and landscape architects, property managers, volunteer guides, head gardeners, conservation planners etc... each of whom are trained in different disciplines which deal with conserving historic landscapes from different perspectives or points of view. The broader community refers to those people who are interested in a particular historic landscape property, and includes the likes of visitors, tourists, local residents, interest groups etc... However, the term community could also include people who have little interest and/or knowledge of a particular historic landscape property. As such, the broader community could range from people who know a great deal about a historic landscape to those who know very little.

The Need for Research into Community and Expert Attitudes

The traditional process of the identification, classification, listing and conservation of historic landscapes being predominantly an expert process raises some potentially important alternatives. The most obvious of these is that the conservation process should not only be an expert process, but should rely more heavily on attitudinal studies and research so as to better ascertain and include community attitudes in the conservation process. Public opinion surveys that have been undertaken to
date, both in the US. and Australia, have identified some very interesting discrepancies between broad community attitudes to the environment and predictions from different interest groups to those attitudes. Many of these studies have found that various interest groups had underestimated the strength of community attitudes. For example, quality of life research undertaken by Milbrath in the US., Public Opinion Surveys undertaken by the Resources for the Future highlighted in the Resources for the Future (RFF) survey in a US. report, Public Opinion of Environmental Issues, (1980) in Washington, Australian Public Opinion Polls - the Gallup method (all quoted in Australian Heritage Commission (1982) The National Estate in 1981: A Report of the Australian Heritage Commission).

Although such studies have primarily been concerned with public attitudes in relation to broad-scale environmental issues, they do highlight the need for similar studies to be undertaken in Australia to accurately assess community attitudes and the attitudes of heritage experts on conservation issues in general and with respect to historic landscape conservation in particular.

Initial landscape assessment research undertaken in the 1970's suggested that '...the values of professional people and probably the elitist groups may not be significantly different from that of the general public' (Fabos and McGregor; 1979, p.21). More recent research undertaken by Smardon, Palmer and Felleman does not support these earlier research findings, concluding that experts evaluations of landscapes may differ from the community (Smardon et al; 1986, p.43). This may well be the case when applied to historic landscape conservation in Australia. Up until the present, the attitudes of various heritage experts and groups such as the National Trust of Australia have been highly respected and have been taken for granted as being representative of those attitudes and values of the broader community. However, it appears that signs of public doubt or questioning are becoming increasingly apparent (Murphy; 1986, p.146). It was these concerns which led to this study.

Objective of the Research

The objective of the research was to compare the attitudes of heritage experts with regard to conserving historic landscapes with those held by members of the broader community. In order to do this, the following questions were addressed:

1) What are the attitudes of the broader community towards conserving historic landscapes?

2) What are the attitudes of heritage experts towards conserving historic landscapes?

3) How do these attitudes of the broader community compare with those of heritage experts? (i.e. what are the similarities and what are the gaps/major differences?)

The Como mansion – deemed by the Australian Heritage Commission to be of National importance.
(4) Are heritage experts representing the attitudes of the broader community in their approaches to conserving historic landscapes?

Research Method

A case study approach was used in the study. It was decided that the best method of obtaining data pertaining to the attitudes of both heritage experts and the broader community was to focus specifically on a few examples of historic landscapes in Victoria, and survey respondents from each group (ie. experts and the community) to obtain the required data. The three case study historic landscapes of Como (see Figure 2), Rippon Lea (see Figure 3) and Gulf Station (see Figure 4) were chosen because they represented three of the best known historic landscapes in Victoria. These three properties, and in particular Como and Rippon Lea, have been the flagship properties of the National Trust of Australia (Victoria) for many years, and have generated the highest visitor attendance figures than any other Trust properties in Victoria.

Standardised questionnaires were the principal means by which the data was collected. Relevant parameters associated with the conservation of historic landscapes were defined. This enabled a comparison of various attitudes and opinions to be obtained for both respondent groups (ie. experts and the community) with respect to specific aspects associated with conserving historic landscapes.

The theoretical basis of the questionnaires for the various respondents at each property correspond to the assessment categories and their related criteria used by most heritage organisations in Australia. These criteria are specified by The Australia ICOMOS Charter for the Conservation of Places of Cultural

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Property</th>
<th>No. Q’aires Issued</th>
<th>No. Q’aires Returned</th>
<th>Response Rate (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Como</td>
<td>16 (Community)</td>
<td>16 (Community)</td>
<td>100% (Community)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>14 (Experts)</td>
<td>12 (Experts)</td>
<td>85.7% (Experts)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rippon Lea</td>
<td>21 (Community)</td>
<td>15 (Community)</td>
<td>71.4% (Community)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>17 (Experts)</td>
<td>17 (Experts)</td>
<td>100% (Experts)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gulf Station</td>
<td>15 (Community)</td>
<td>15 (Community)</td>
<td>100% (Community)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>12 (Experts)</td>
<td>11 (Experts)</td>
<td>91.6% (Experts)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall</td>
<td>52 (Community)</td>
<td>46 (Community)</td>
<td>88.5% (Community)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>43 (Experts)</td>
<td>40 (Experts)</td>
<td>93% (Experts)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>95 (Overall)</td>
<td>86 (Overall)</td>
<td>90.5% (Overall)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 1: Response Rate for the three Case Study Properties
representing both expert and community opinions on the three case study properties. The following table (Figure 1) summarises the response rate for the three properties:

Questionnaire data was transformed into spreadsheets from which a series of graphs were generated using Microsoft Excel (Version 3) software. The findings reported below were developed by analysing these graphs and spreadsheets in detail.

Findings

The following conclusion summarise the major trends that were identified during the course of this research. Although both the community and heritage experts displayed general interest in the assessment categories related to historic, aesthetic and scientific value, some interesting differences and similarities (i.e. ‘shades of meaning’) were highlighted.

Historic value received the highest overall interest level ratings by both respondent groups, with heritage experts being generally more interested than the community in historic value. The community were highly interested in the major historical features associated with the three historic properties (i.e. the buildings, the garden/landscape etc.), but they differed in agreement to the experts by being less interested in the ‘finer-detail’ historic criteria. This trend is to be expected as it is reasonable to assume that the experts have a greater overall understanding of the historical significance of these properties than does the community. However, it would be interesting to examine whether the community’s interest in the ‘finer-detail’ historic criteria would increase if they better understood the historical significance of these lesser known attributes. Indications from this research suggested that the community wished to learn more about the historic value of each property.

Aesthetic value received the second highest overall interest level ratings from both heritage experts and the community, with the community generally more interested than the experts in aesthetic value. Unlike the historic category, the community displayed a higher interest in the ‘finer-detail’ of aesthetic value than the experts. This suggests that the community values aesthetic qualities of historic landscapes more highly than heritage experts. Also indicated was that the community values aesthetic qualities of the garden/landscape more than the experts, who appear to be more interested in the aesthetic value of the buildings than the community. The results from this research highlighted the importance of the aesthetic value of historic landscapes, particularly for the broader community. This has often been underestimated by many heritage experts.

Scientific value received a surprisingly high overall interest level rating by the community and heritage experts, with the community generally more
interested than experts in scientific value. The community expressed significantly higher interest in the scientific importance of plants and ecological habitats associated with historic landscapes. Recognition by the community of habitat value suggests that this aspect of historic landscapes is potentially underplayed at present. The community expressed a desire to obtain better interpretive information explaining the scientific aspects of historic properties.

The most important conclusions to be made in relation to the social, funding and overall experience categories are concerned with better interpretative information being required and that historic landscapes need to be better 'marketed' to the community, especially in terms of the total atmosphere of the property which includes aspects of both the built and natural environments. The research indicated that both the community and the experts expressed the need for better interpretive information to inform visitors, in the form of better signage, brochures and the like. Overall, experts displayed a higher recognition than the community of the need to improve interpretive information at historic landscapes.

An interesting trend was also observed in the community's interest in public open days and property promotions, which was low compared with the experts. This would seem to have important implications for the way in which funds are generated for the continued conservation of historic landscapes. If the community is not interested in property open days or promotional events, then this suggests that they are possibly not being marketed adequately to meet the needs of the community. The research also indicated that the community found the overall atmosphere of the properties more relaxing than experts, and that many visitors valued historic properties as recreational resources.

Perhaps the most significant conclusion is that historic landscapes need to be better marketed to the public. In order for this to be done effectively, heritage experts, including property management committees, property managers, head curators and expert organisations, need to be aware of the interests and attitudes of the community. Attitudinal studies of this kind should therefore be seen as an essential method of determining how to satisfy the needs and aspirations of the community. A high proportion of people visit historic properties because of their recreational potential. Visitors often associate a dollar value with this recreational potential, and it is paramount that visitors receive full value for money.

This 'value for money' issue was strongly represented in the research findings, with the heritage experts strongly indicating that perhaps the full potential of many historic properties has not been fully recognised or achieved. In order for this full potential to be reached, it is imperative that the entire historic landscape is marketed to the community in a more presentable manner, encompassing elements from all significant aspects (i.e. both the significance of the house and the garden/landscape). All of these combined elements create the 'total atmosphere' which should be seen as a potentially marketable feature. This issue of better marketing and promoting historic landscapes is a crucial factor in the continued management of historic landscapes, and should be seen as the major way in which funds are generated in order to pay for the continued conservation of these properties.

Often the findings of empirical 'pilot studies' generate more questions and avenues for future research than they do answers. This is certainly the case in this study, as a number of possibilities for future research have become apparent.

As the community consists of various user groups such as the elderly, school children, family groups, special interest groups, and tourists, each group may have different attitudes or interests. As was highlighted by the Property Manager at Como, the 1988 Bicentennial saw a huge influx of overseas tourists to Australia, particularly from Japan. Currently at Como, Japanese tourists far outweigh any other user group in terms of total numbers. It would therefore be interesting to examine the attitudes and interests of Japanese tourists with respect to historic landscapes, and to see how they compare with other user groups.

The research also identified some divergence in the attitudes and opinions between groups of heritage experts and organisations, notably between the National Trust and the Historic Buildings Council. Further investigation with a view to understanding why these differences occur and how they might be rectified seems justified in this regard.

One of the most encouraging findings to come out of this research is that the heritage experts and organisations appear to be aware of the need for improvements in management and conservation. Also encouraging is that the community has indicated that they have a high degree of faith in the heritage experts and organisations which are responsible for representing their interests in the conservation and management process and, broadly speaking, their attitudes are similar. Indications from
this research suggest that the community feel that their current level of involvement in the conservation and management process is adequate, and that in general they do not feel that they should become more involved, except in the areas of interpretation and recreational use.

It is imperative that this partnership between the community and heritage experts is constantly monitored and assessed, so as to enable the maximum conservation and management potential of historic landscapes to be fully realised.

References


Driver, B. L. (1976) Quantification of Outdoor Recreationist Preferences, USDA Forest Service, Rocky Mountain Ranger Experimental Station, Colorado.


Biographical Notes:

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Gulf Station in the early morning mist (Source: National Trust of Australia (Victoria) postcard, photographed by David Stubbs).