Identifying, assessing, conserving and managing elements of a cultural landscape: a case study of the Alstonville Plateau, north-eastern New South Wales

Introduction

This presentation will comment on a community-oriented heritage study undertaken in 1995/1996 by the authors, with the support of the Alstonville and District Citizens and Ratepayers Association, Southern Cross University and Ballina Shire Council. The purpose of the study was to determine whether the Alstonville Plateau was a valuable landscape of cultural significance and, if so, to develop a conservation and management policy for the environmental heritage resources of the Plateau. The study was assisted by a grant from the New South Wales Government on the recommendations of the Heritage Council of New South Wales.

The study area is situated 12 kilometres west of Ballina in north-eastern New South Wales. According to the community, it covers an area of approximately 100 square kilometres and covers some 20 per cent of Ballina Shire and less than five per cent of Lismore City local government area. The landscape of the plateau owes much to its geological past. It is near the southern extent of lava flows from the Mount Warning volcanic complex. These flows did not erode and dissect to the same extent as flows to the north which are near to the source. This resulted in a fairly uniform upland area averaging a height of 150 metres above sea level. Unlike many landscapes which frequently grade from one location to another, the plateau is a discrete landscape standing above the coastal plains to the east and river valleys to the north, south and west.

Today the plateau is a rural landscape which discloses associations with the hard working, community-minded and inventive agriculturalists and dairy farmers of

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Figure 1 Rural landscape showing typical grazing land and small rainforest remnant, Alstonville Plateau. (Photograph: Jane & Geoff Gardiner)
the early 20th century. These farmers, with the help of the fertile soil and high rainfall, produced a picturesque green landscape in a somewhat English style. Twelve big scrub remnants, listed on the Interim Register of the National Estate are located on the plateau and numerous smaller rainforest remnants are scattered across the landscape (see figure 1).

Our presentation seeks to describe the manner in which the community was involved in identifying and assessing heritage, or 'special' places, on the Alstonville Plateau. In particular, it comments on the use of a social values methodology, developed by Chris Johnston, and concludes that this approach should be adopted as a first step in cultural landscape studies. However, it also draws attention to the fact that at the conclusion of the study, the community and its local council found it difficult to implement any suggested actions to conserve the cultural landscape.

Social values methodology

Social values methodology is a subjective methodology which confirms that people develop an attachment to places, as a consequence of using them over time. It is a methodology that acknowledges there is more to heritage studies than just what is gleaned from historical research or what can be seen from the window of a car. On the Alstonville Plateau a number of factors convinced us to use this methodology as a first step in the identification and assessment of heritage places. Firstly, only one book had been written on the history of the area, secondly there had never been a heritage study of Ballina Shire or the plateau and thirdly there was no active historical society in the area. Hence there were few primary or secondary resource materials for a heritage professional to examine. However, the main reason for adopting this approach was the fact that this method required community involvement and required the community to comment on social values.

Case study

Three approaches were adopted to illicit information about places that were special to the community of the Alstonville Plateau. The first approach consisted of involving adult members of the community in two workshops, the second approach was directed at high school students and centred on a photographic assignment, and the third approach used a questionnaire designed to confirm, amend or reject community values identified by the workshop participants and high school students.

Workshop component

At the workshops participants were directed to undertake specific tasks. Many of these tasks were based on the key components Melnick identified as necessary in the evaluation of rural historic districts in the American National Parks System. Specifically, participants were asked to:
• Define the area known locally as the Alstonville Plateau by drawing its boundary on a 1:25,000 topographic map. Reasons for the location of this boundary were required. Group consensus was also required in this task and one map per group was produced.

• Identify valued qualities or attributes of the plateau in a general sense. Responses were listed on large sheets of paper and all participants had the opportunity to add to or subtract from the list.

• Individually identify special items. Special items were represented by eight symbols. Participants were required to place the symbols on Ballina Shire's rural road and locality map at a scale of 1:50,000. Symbols covered eight categories considered important in landscape evaluation; namely landscapes, views and viewing places, natural items/areas, historic features, community places and associations, travel routes, landmarks and the location of important events.

• Complete a data sheet on each of the special items identified on the shire map. These data sheets were provided by the heritage professional and required participants to value the items identified using criteria accepted by the Heritage Branch of the Department of Urban Affairs and Planning; such as Aboriginal value, aesthetic value, historic value, natural value, scientific/research value and social value. A space was provided on the data sheets for participants to include any other value and they were encouraged to list a number of values if they thought this relevant. Participants were also asked to indicate if the item would be widely valued by the community or only sections of it. Discussion about each item was encouraged.

• Report back to the workshop describing the items their group considered important. All participants were asked to comment on the items identified.

Student photographic assignment component

It became apparent after the workshops, that to achieve a more representative view of the landscape and the elements within it, the values of young adults needed to be considered. Rather than repeat the workshop sessions it was decided that another approach to determining the value of the landscape should be trialed.

Year ten geography students at Alstonville High School were targeted to undertake this assignment, which had three specific parts:

1. A classroom-based lesson where students were asked to define the plateau, list its qualities/attributes and identify one special place in the area. At this lesson students were also briefed on the photographic aspects of the assignment.

2. The photographing of places considered special by the young adults. Students were asked to work in groups and were given a roll of 12 print film.
3. The creation of a poster which uses the photographs to tell us why the place is valuable to the young adults.

**Questionnaire component**

A questionnaire inviting the community to confirm, amend or reject the heritage items identified at the community workshops and in the school photographic assignment was the third method used to assess community values. The questionnaire consisted of two parts. The first page listed 105 heritage items which were grouped under the headings: landscapes and views; natural areas; historic features; community places; and landmarks. Respondents were then asked to indicate which 10 items they considered most significant from this list. The second page contained seven questions which ranged from asking respondents to add any other special places to the list, to removing items not considered significant from the list. Other questions asked respondents what features of the plateau should remain unchanged and if any heritage places needed protection.

**Study evaluation**

The value of using the above methodology was evident in both the large number and different types of places identified. The list below is extracted from the questionnaire and illustrates the types of places identified. Each activity built on previous consultations and provided much information quickly about heritage items. It also had the added advantage of introducing many local residents to the authors who were later able to contact them and acquire additional information often in the form of family histories. This approach also revealed that the community was knowledgeable about the history of the area and its remnant rainforests and associated fauna.

The fact that this methodology encouraged the community to reveal many places that could be called 'secret' places is another benefit. These secret places were usually located on private land, not visible from any public roads, were commonly not documented in local publications, but were well known to those who had lived in the area for many years. For example, workshop participants talked about a brick arch and dam over Youngmans Creek. They wrote that it was part of a sluice gate that diverted water from the creek to the Richmond River Sugar Mill, at Rous Mill, during the late 1890s. Later verification of this place by the authors revealed that this is the only fabric that remains of a sugar mill which at one time employed over 100 men.

The community was also keen to tell about 'secret' natural places, particularly waterfalls. Many of the waterfalls had been tourist attractions at the turn of the century. Today access to these falls is limited and only local residents who know the plateau can use these recreational sites. The posters compiled by the students contained many photographs of these falls and it was obvious that they were highly valued by this section of the community.
The fact that this methodology allows the authors to use a variety of approaches to obtain community information and values is also of merit. In this case study the use of the student photographic assignment provided much additional data. The visual nature of this component made it obvious when a place had social value as the photograph contained people. Other values such as aesthetic, natural and scientific value were also revealed in the photographs. The authors considered that the posters produced by the young adults best illustrated the landscapes of the plateau and the small-scale elements within them. Workshop participants and questionnaire respondents failed to record the minute, mundane or portable elements of the environment such as fences, cow bails, cream sheds or the many controversial dip sites. The posters also had the potential to reduce the amount of time required for field inspection of places.

This methodology also guarantees that the social values of the cultural landscape will be recorded. While the community's judgement of why a place was important could be questioned, the very fact that a place was mentioned at all means it has social value to that community. At the workshops different groups often recorded different values for the same place. For example Lumley Park, a regenerated rainforest park located in the village of Alstonville, was valued by one group for its historic, natural and scientific values and by another only for its aesthetic value. Most groups wrote about its natural and historic values yet no group mentioned its social value as a recreational place and tourist attraction.
Conserving and managing the Alstonville landscape

At the completion of the community consultation component of this study the authors considered the cultural landscape of the plateau was a socially significant landscape. Yet the question then remained: what was an appropriate conservation strategy for the Alstonville Plateau? A range of actions were presented to Ballina Shire and Lismore City councils for consideration. They included:

- Amending existing heritage schedules to include additional heritage items.
- Identifying key views and viewing areas on the councils LEPs. Once identified it was envisaged these key views could be protected by 'viewing envelopes' (which would be akin to building envelopes). A special clause would need to be inserted in the LEPs outlining developments allowed within these envelopes.
- Reviewing the current environmental protection and rural zones, with the view to expanding the aims and objectives of these zones to include consideration of the cultural landscape.
- Managing the major waterfalls on public lands with the view to making them available to the public and pursuing a policy of acquiring major waterfalls currently on private land.

While both councils received copies of the study to date, neither council has considered undertaking any of the recommended actions. It has been suggested that this lack of action stems from the fact that most of the heritage places are located on private land. Also, councils on the north coast have been reluctant to impose restrictions on agricultural activities. They are conservative councils and the arguments concerning the management of the cultural landscapes are challenging.

For instance, the plateau is seeing a reduction in grazing activities as the dairy industry continues to rationalise and the beef market is depressed. Macadamia plantations, on the other hand are expanding, taking up the grazing lands. However, agricultural activities associated with nut trees are quite different from those associated with grazing. Firstly, to maximise profits trees need to be planted over the entire paddock. The trace of a former cane tramway or an avenue of trees leading to the site of a former sugar mill are seen as hindrances as they restrict the movement of machines. Macadamia plantations do not require fencing and, in fact, there is a tendency to remove fencing on these plantations along with any other built items like dairy bails and cream sheds. Finally, as the trees mature the views that the community enjoys from the public roads disappear.

A further challenge is presented simply by population growth in the area, as this not only brings more people and their homes, but requires new or upgraded infrastructure, such as water supplies, wider roads, more power lines, educational facilities, shops and sewage systems. In an area with a large number of rural residential developments it is difficult for councils to balance
arguments between safety and the social value of country roads. Country roads in the area are usually one-lane wide, follow the contours of the landscape and twist around farm boundaries.

Waterfalls present a different challenge. They can be dangerous places and councils do not want to become involved in litigation; on the other hand, these are places have the potential to become tourist attractions.

Conclusions

The authors conclude that the social values approach used to identify and assess the landscape of the plateau has many merits. They do not suggest that this should be the only approach used to evaluate landscapes because as Lamb says, 'the fact a local community does not value a place which is thought significant nationally would not be grounds to remove it from the National Estate'. Nevertheless, they argue that this approach should be used as a first step in any landscape evaluation.

In hindsight it seems that the identification and assessment of the cultural landscape was an easy task and that it is the development and implementation of an appropriate conservation plan for the plateau that will require additional reflection. Obviously the initial recommendations made to local councils were considered too difficult to implement. Perhaps we as heritage professionals need to advertise and promote the steps taken by Wingecarribee Council so that other councils don't consider themselves alone in tackling the conservation of landscapes. In this area of the north coast it will require local councils to examine current rural land-use activities and consider if they are appropriate, perhaps by way of the scale of their operations or use. General questions may need to be asked, such as when is a rural industry such as a nursery or feedlot a rural industry as opposed to an industry?
Extract from community questionnaire: listing of special places

**LANDSCAPES AND VIEWS**

Buckombil Hill
Buffer Zone rural setting
Coolgardie Range coastal views
Cowlong Road agricultural views
Gap Road coastal view
Leadbeaters Lane coastal view
Maguires Creek valley views
Panorama Park coastal view
Ocean View Drive coastal view
Peanut Stooks various locations
Perry Street rural view
Perrys Hill coastal views
Pineapple Road mountain view
Rous Mill rural view
Slades Corner rural and mountain view
Sneaths Road rural and mountain views
Tintenbar School rural views
Tuckombil landscape & mountain views
Uralba Road valley views
Victoria Park rural/coastal view
Wardell Rd rural/coastal view
Wollongbar Highway mountain view
Wollongbar opposite TAFE southern rural view

**COMMUNITY PLACES AND LANDMARKS**

Alstonville Pool
Alstonville Shopping Plaza
Baptist Church
Catholic Church
Community Centre
Summerland House with No Steps
Macadamia Magic
Namajira Haven
Open gardens eg. Shallom Park
Presbyterian Church
Rous Mill Hall
Scout Hall Gap road
TAFE Wollongbar
Wollongbar Hall

**NATURAL AREAS**

Booyong scrub
Brockley rainforest remnants
Bulwinkle Park
Dalwood Falls
Davis Scrub Nature Reserve
Ellis Road rainforest remnants
Frederiksens Falls
Howards Crossing/water hole
Lumley Park
Maguires Creek and Teven Valley
Marom Creek and Falls
Marshalls Falls and Duck Creek
Uralba cattle dip Hoop Pines
Ocean View rainforest regeneration
Teak tree Ellis Road
Tosha Falls
Uralba Nature Reserve
Victoria Park Nature Reserve
Willowbank Rainforest Reserve
Wollongbar hole-in-the-ground
Wollongbar rainforest remnant
Yellow Creek /swimming hole

**HISTORIC FEATURES**

Agricultural Research Institute
Ainsleys Quarry Tregeagle
Alphadale Cemetery and Alphadale Church
Alstonville Agricultural Showgrounds
Alstonville Cemetery
Alstonville Post Office
Ballina-Booyong railway
Bau Farm
Beacom House
Bewers Hill site
Brockley Cottage
Bulwinkel House
Butter/peanut factory
endnotes

2 'Heritage place' is a general term which includes a comprehensive range of heritage items. A heritage place could be anything from a moveable object to a relic, a street tree, a landscape showing a particular land use or a village.
3 J. F. Crawford, Duck Creek Mountain - Now Alstonville, Northern Star, Lismore, 1983.
5 NSW Department of Planning, Heritage Assessment Guidelines, NSW Department of Planning, Sydney, 1990.
6 F. Russell, Farm Life on the Richmond and Tweed Rivers, John Sanch, Sydney, c.1906.