Introduction. Intangible values of mountain landscapes: methods and models

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The broad discipline of heritage has many facets and many levels. Members of Australia ICOMOS have a wealth of theoretical and practical knowledge in a wide range of disciplines but we can always learn more, and this issue of Historic Environment introduces us to new approaches to understanding intangible heritage values. In recent years, ICOMOS heritage practitioners, whether archaeologists, architects, geographers, historians, landscape specialists, or planners, have been grappling with the intangible values associated with heritage places, this aspect of heritage being central to the 1999 Burra Charter amendments.

However, despite advances in theoretical understanding, our practical understanding is as yet not as strong as that for dealing with the physical aspects of place. We are well able to identify and record heritage and can assess and manage physical values; these are well-grounded professional processes, arising from many years of heritage practice. Surveying, assessing and managing fabric values is a sophisticated and technical process, arising from discipline development in archaeology, architecture and object conservation. However, for intangible values, such as ephemeral features and associations of a place, aesthetic qualities and social meanings, it is a different story, and although much has been achieved in the last decade the intangible is still elusive.

The International Year of Mountains conference in 2002, Celebrating Mountains, provided an opportunity to explore the intangible aspects of heritage in the cultural heritage component – Mountains of Meaning. Australia ICOMOS, a partner in the conference management, encouraged this theme in order to present it within a forum of land managers, scientist and traditional owners; some of these papers are included in this issue of Historic Environment. An earlier issue of this journal in 2003, Volume 17: 2, covered the context of the conference, of both cultural and natural heritage, management and tourism, and listed all the papers presented.

This issue of Historic Environment is devoted to a sub-theme of the conference – measuring and managing the intangible cultural heritage using a range of models. Intangible heritage values cover the historical, spiritual and symbolic meanings of a place, as well as the evocations derived from a place. This selection of papers covers methods to analyse and appreciate these values, conflicting views, and processes for social interaction that revitalise the continuum of social associations of people with places.

Olwen Beazley works through the difficulties facing world heritage assessments of intangible value. This she explores through her paper ‘Five Feet from Heaven’, using as models several mountains inscribed on the World Heritage List for their non-material, associative, intangible values and discussing how these places can be assessed for spiritual and inspirational value. Mountains as landmarks and place-makers are the theme explored by Catherine Brouwer. She considers the visibility of the mountain and its iconic status, using the Glass House Mountains, Queensland, as a model. Chris Johnston and Juliet Ramsay further explore the assessment issues, discussing as a model a study undertaken to develop a method for identifying and assessing inspirational landscapes – a project commissioned by the Commonwealth Government, through the Australian Heritage Commission, and now continued by the Department of the Environment and Heritage.

The indivisible association of cultural and natural values of the Australian Alps national parks landscapes emerged strongly in the 2002 conference. Geoff Ashley discusses hut landscapes in mountains and the emotional meanings they convey in being part of and putting people within a remote and unique environment, stressing that the essential ingredient of human modification resulting in far-reaching landscape degradation and intensive restoration management regimes. Bernard and Deirdre Slattery consider the conflicts in Australian identity, myth-making, science and the misreading of the Australian mountain landscapes.

The need for stronger cultural and natural values integration in managing mountain landscapes and community connectedness to mountain landscapes is discussed in the paper by Jim Russell and Chris Johnston. In this case, the model was work undertaken with the upper Mersey Valley community of Tasmania who considered themselves dispossessed in the establishment of the adjacent wilderness world heritage area. Although in Tasmania these connections are just beginning to be accepted, the ACT Government is moving to a co-management arrangement between the Ngunnawal community in order to restore the connections of the Ngunnawal community to the mountain landscapes of Namadgi National Park. The progress and prospects of this arrangement are presented in the paper by Matilda House, Maxine Cooper and Terence Uren.

Finally, it must be stressed that these papers are just a small selection of a stimulating array and that some of the most powerful presentations on the cultural values of landscapes came from the Aboriginal people present at the conference. Jo Willnot discussed her experience with Aboriginal women visiting the Blue Mountains and can have the final word in this editorial: ‘Singing up the country gives strength and life back into people and the land and the water and the sky’.

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