Introduction

**Selected papers from the Annual Conference of Australia ICOMOS**

**Port Arthur, Tasmania November 2004**

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In November 2004 the Port Arthur Historic Site in south-east Tasmania was the venue for the Australia ICOMOS national conference. The conference was organised by the Port Arthur Historic Site Management Authority in association with Australia ICOMOS, Tourism Tasmania and the University of Tasmania Sustainable Tourism Cooperative Research Centre.

Cultural heritage tourism is not a modern invention, but with increased numbers of visitors also comes increased pressures, not only as wear and tear on fragile fabric but also in terms of the visitor experience. Queues of irritable tourists at places such as the Acropolis in Athens or the Mogao cave temples in China do not contribute to a qualitative visitor experience. Moreover, the very fabric of these places is threatened by the impact of literally hundreds of thousands (in some case millions) of feet and hands per year, not to mention the peripheral impact of the car parks, cafes, toilets and “get your photograph taken wearing funny clothes” businesses that have proliferated at many historic sites.

The conference organisers were concerned that there were not many opportunities for dialogue between the diverse participants involved in the cultural heritage tourism industry, hence the decision to organise the conference. The title chosen for the event was *Loving it to Death: Sustainable Tourism at Historic Places*, and the intended focus was an examination of the issues involved in promoting, managing and sustaining cultural tourism at places of cultural significance. The conference would provide a forum for a dialogue between participants from the cultural tourism industry, from tourism operators, promoters and planners, to archaeologists, historians and interpreters. It was intended that the presentations would address a diverse range of topics relating to issues such as conserving cultural value, changing visitor trends and expectations, managing the impacts on fabric, and how to pay for it all.

Port Arthur was a superbly picturesque place which (with some irony) was created out of 18th and 19th-century European attitudes to crime, punishment, social engineering and colonial expansion – a “hell on earth” for its first involuntary visitors. Its original designers did not contemplate its eventual manifestation as an international cultural tourism destination. Today the Port Arthur Historic Site is required to manage the same tensions between conservation and exploitation, the same imperatives for sustainability of the asset, that confront other historic sites.

Over 160 delegates registered and attended the conference, primarily from mainland Australia and Tasmania, but delegates from the USA, South Africa, Russia, Hong Kong, the United Kingdom, Hawaii and Norfolk Island also attended. The process of selecting a cross section of papers suitable for publication in Historic Environment from the 5 plenary and 42 parallel sessions papers presented at the conference was daunting – we needed to select papers which would both exemplify the broad range of issues examined by the conference presenters and at the same time produce a readable and stimulating journal.

Readers of the journal will of course judge the latter criteria for themselves, but certainly the scope of the included papers will attest to the former, covering the conference session themes of *Integrity, Sustainability, Viability and Tensions*. At the philosophical end of the spectrum, the Pocock paper questions the use and misuse of the term authenticity in regard to the conservation of historic sites and their presentation to visitors. Conversely, Tongo describes the process of eliciting the personal reminiscences of ex-prisoners in a very hands-on approach to understanding both the fabric and the intangible human values of the Robben Island maximum security prison.

In between these sit a diverse range of papers that deal with issues such as the threats to sensitive fabric at two fragile sites in China posed by mass tourism, understanding the motivations and expectations of visitors to conflict sites such as Gallipoli, and the dynamics of sustainable cultural tourism within a modern city.

The conference, as the content of this journal will attest, did provide an opportunity for a range of views to be aired by a diverse group of participants in the cultural tourism industry. Those of us that research, dig up, maintain, restore, interpret, manage and source funds for historic places don’t always think of ourselves as part of the industry – but we are. These places tell us something about our own history or that of someone else, and increasingly people with the means to travel are coming to see for themselves what they are all about. We do need to work with the owners, operators, entrepreneurs, financiers, governments and local communities to ensure that all of the voices are listened to and that the key messages are heard. Conferences such as *Loving it to Death* provide an important platform from which we can both speak and listen.

Finally, thanks to those who contributed to the selection and refereeing of the papers included in the journal, and to Aedeen Cremin for her infinite patience in publishing this long awaited issue of Historic Environment.

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Convenor

*Loving it to Death Conference*