Isolation - a management issue

Introduction

Between 1988 and 1992, Linda Clark and Elspeth Wishart visited Antarctica to record and assess the cultural significance of the buildings at the Australian stations of Wilkes, Casey and Mawson. Although not part of their brief, inevitably their thoughts turned to the management of redundant station buildings. While the extreme climate and isolation of Australia’s Antarctic stations makes their management particularly difficult, similar management problems are encountered at other isolated sites. The net effect of these problems is to make the management of isolated sites more difficult and expensive.

This occurs in the following ways:

1. Lack of logistical support

The managerial and logistical resources necessary for the care of historic sites are rarely locally available in isolated areas. The management of these sites must therefore rely upon skilled people, materials and energy supplies being imported into an area that may have no roads, runways or harbour facilities. Under these circumstances, poor weather can block access for many months.

2. Extreme climates

Many parts of Australia are isolated because the harsh local climate has discouraged settlement. Typically, sites in these areas, such as a mining camp, were established to serve a specific purpose and often have a relatively short working life. Because of the severity of the climate, costly and continuous repairs to redundant buildings are required but are difficult to provide because of the isolation.

3. Lack of grass roots support

A community’s pride and sense of ownership of its heritage often provides the impetus for preservation. This grass roots support and enthusiasm is usually missing in isolated areas.

4. Limited tourist potential

Isolated sites rarely have good access or sufficient infrastructure to accommodate many tourists. It can be difficult and expensive to provide facilities that comply with Article 8 of the Burra Charter which stipulates that new structures should not adversely affect the visual setting. At less isolated and more frequently visited sites, management costs are often offset by the tourist dollar. A large section of the population would question spending money on restoring rarely visited sites.

5. Limited opportunity for alternative use

Redundant historic buildings have been used for many purposes, such as museums, art centres, domestic dwellings, hotels and offices. Continued, appropriate use helps to ensure the security and maintenance of a site. These options are generally not available when an isolated historic building or site has outlived its original function.

6. Protection from vandals

Evidence suggests that rarely visited, unused and isolated buildings are prone to vandalism. It is extremely difficult and costly to provide effective security at isolated sites. Because of their isolation, damage may go undetected for a long time.

Linda Clark

Linda Clark trained and worked as an archaeological conservator in England before moving to Australia in 1983 to work at the Northern Territory Museum of Arts and Sciences as Curator of Conservation. Since 1986 she has worked at the Queen Victoria Museum and Art Gallery (QVMAG) in Launceston in the Conservation Department. For the last five years Linda and Elspeth Wishart from the QVMAG have been involved in recording Australia’s Antarctic heritage. They have visited the continent three times, documenting the old station buildings at Wilkes, Casey and Mawson. They have also mounted an Australian touring exhibition, 66 South, based on their heritage work and experiences in Antarctic.
7. Immediate decisions

In isolated areas where access is infrequent and difficult, the luxury of well thought-out management decisions, arrived at after thorough documentation and analysis is not always possible. Immediate, on the spot decisions sometimes have to be made if the survival of all or part of the site is to be assured. Anticipation of difficulties prior to visiting the site will ensure decisions are as informed as possible.

Managing isolated sites

The isolation of a culturally significant site or object does not negate the need for a management plan. If anything, it emphasises the need for such a plan. The Burra Charter caters for a pragmatic approach to management that recognises the reality of budgetary limitations and logistical constraints. Too narrow an interpretation of the Burra Charter, that fails to appreciate the very real problems listed above, will hinder the development of a workable and sustainable management plan.

Over the last five years the Queen Victoria Museum & Art Gallery (QVMAG) has participated in recording a number of heritage sites in isolated areas and has seen many different approaches to their management:

1. Demolition: Casey station, Antarctica

Casey station, particularly the tunnel complex, was a unique Australian station, designed as a low cost solution to meet the demands of the harsh Antarctic environment. It was recorded by the QVMAG in 1988/89, the year after most of the buildings had been vacated. The following year the station was demolished to comply with international treaty obligations, then in force, which stated that all unused buildings in Antarctica should be removed. (This obligation has now been superseded by a provision in the Madrid protocol that stipulates nations have a responsibility to preserve recognised historic landmarks).

At the time, demolition seemed a satisfactory solution for the Antarctic Division, given the station’s limited operating budget, infrequent and difficult access by sea, and the poor condition of the buildings. An attempt was made to return one of the buildings, assessed by the QVMAG as having particular significance, to Australia, but due to the vagaries of the unpredictable Antarctic weather this did not eventuate.

2. Honourable deterioration: Wilkes station, Antarctica

This site, consisting of a number of mostly American-built plywood buildings, many partly filled or buried within ice, was recorded by the QVMAG in 1988, almost 20 years after the station was abandoned. To many expeditioners, Wilkes is a place full of character, providing a link with earlier Antarctic history. Other expeditioners see the site as an eyesore.

The site is being left to slowly decay and currently receives little maintenance. This solution enables the contextual relationship of the site to be maintained and provides an opportunity to get more information from the site in the future. It may, however, only delay a more interventionist management approach if deterioration of the buildings reaches a point where they become a public liability.
3. Continued occupancy: Melaleuca, south-west Tasmania

Melaleuca is situated in the south-west of Tasmania in a World Heritage Area. It was the home of Deny King, a pioneering tin miner who built his home, established a garden and raised a family in this harsh, remote wilderness. Following Deny’s recent death, his family took over the lease and maintains Melaleuca as a holiday refuge. It is implicitly recognised that this site will change as the needs of the family change; however, the spirit of Melaleuca survives through continuing the family association.

4. Relocation: Heard Island barrels

Relocation is a management last-resort, warranted only where the significance of a site or an object transcends its contextual value and there is no other means to ensure survival.

Heard Island is a sub-Antarctic scientific station, administered by the Australian Antarctic Division, although only visited every few years. In the late 19th century Heard Island was a busy whaling station. Many evocative relics from those days litter the coastline. In the late 1980s, a row of wooden barrels, lying on a grassy bank beside the shore, were removed and returned to Australia where they are presently stored at the QVMAG.

This controversial decision was taken by well intentioned expeditioners, concerned that the barrels would be lost to the sea if no immediate action was taken. The coastline was rapidly eroding and because of the isolation of the island there was no possibility of it being stabilised. It was taken without cultural significance being established and before a management plan had been formulated. It is of relevance to note that Articles 9 and 10 of the Burra Charter allow for the removal of buildings and contents respectively, although only if there is no other means of ensuring their security and survival. In the case of the Heard Island barrels, they have since been thoroughly documented in Australia and made available to researchers for scientific examination. In this way important information about whaling history has been retrieved, despite the loss of context.

5. Conservation/restoration as a tourist attraction: Maria Island penal colony, Tasmania

The physical and historical attractions of Maria Island are sufficient to attract considerable numbers of tourists to this isolated island located off the east coast of Tasmania. As a designated National Park, the government provides funds and facilities for permanent rangers to maintain the park, although vandalism remains a perennial problem.

6. Unresolved: Mawson station, Antarctica

The old Mawson station, dating from 1954, is the oldest continuously occupied scientific station in Antarctica. The surviving buildings represent all of the building styles developed by Australian National Antarctic Research Expeditions. Both individual buildings and the station as a whole have considerable significance. These buildings will soon become redundant as activities are moved to a new, purpose-built station nearby. To maintain the buildings in a safe condition is costly in terms of labour, finance and energy; in contemporary terms they are inefficient and unsuitable for storage or accommodation, and few tourists visit the station. Their fate is still to be decided.