LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Don Ellsmore (Historic Environment, Volume V, No. 4) holds the National Trust and others accountable for a great number of woes that appear to be troubling him in the administration and execution of heritage conservation.

He finds particularly disturbing the way in which conservation is promoted, and quotes as an example, the Trust's use of the word 'restoration,' when it really means 'conservation.' Restoration, he says, is a 'fairy tale process' and it only demonstrates one's conservation illiteracy to confuse it with conservation.

Mr. Ellsmore wants us all to use the language of the ICOMOS Burra Charter all the time. But is it fair to expect lay people to adopt the precise, technical terminology of any, let alone all, professional groups?

What a patient calls a 'heart attack,' the medical practitioner refers to as a 'myocardial infarct,' meaning a section of the heart muscle is damaged. To both parties, the result is the same. To the patient, the precision of the language is not important; it is the treatment that needs to be precise!

For many years, lay people have used the word 'restore' in a broad sense to describe any work that 'makes good' a place which has deteriorated somehow or other. It was a catchall term prior to the Burra Charter, and it is still in use.

Subtleties aside, the National Trust (and indeed other organisations and people) must use language that will be clearly understood by the target audience. That is the basis of effective communication. If the National Trust abandons that principle, it risks losing its popular support.

At the same time, the Trust is aware of its educational responsibilities. Historic Environment readers will be aware that Dr. J.S. Kerr's important work, 'The Conservation Plan,' with its recommended procedures resting solidly on ICOMOS principles, and couched in the terms of the Burra Charter, is published by the Trust.

The Trust is careful to use precise terminology where it matters most - in conversation with other professionals and in the instructive literature it circulates to conservation practitioners. The Conservation Plans that it prepares for its own properties demonstrate this.

Mr. Ellsmore made one other point which needs response.

He refers to the Trust's 'lukewarm efforts' to reach school children through educational kits. In addition to these kits, the Trust has a school membership programme which reaches more than 300 schools in New South Wales via talks, activities, a newsletter and school visits. It prepares material for teachers in partnership with the New South Wales Department of Education, and is involved in teacher in-service courses. All of this is in addition to the Trust's very significant educational activity in its museum and gallery properties.

In conclusion, I would just draw to your readers' attention the fact that the Trust is a non-profit, non-governmental organisation, which receives in total from both State and Federal Governments, less than 4 per cent of its income. There are many areas where the Trust would like to do more, but, in all of these areas, finance is the inhibiting factor.

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