Melbourne Water’s approach to heritage asset management

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Abstract

While focused on historic heritage, this paper chronicles Melbourne Water’s journey in developing and implementing a new approach to better manage the heritage resources (Aboriginal and historic) in its custody and outlines Melbourne Water’s response to dealing with heritage legislation in Victoria, including stakeholder and community expectations.

A new model of cultural heritage management has been adopted by Melbourne Water that has helped the business transition from an ad-hoc approach (project based) to an integrated (strategic) way of managing heritage. Although framed by legislation, it is being driven by a corporate objective and shaped by heightened expectations from stakeholders (government and community) resulting in better integration of cultural heritage management into service and project delivery as part of the solution not the problem.

In response, Melbourne Water set a corporate goal in 2006 to achieve this integration through the development of its inaugural Cultural Heritage Strategy 2008-2011: Protecting and Preserving Our Cultural Heritage (Melbourne Water: 2008). The strategy has since facilitated better understanding and greater awareness of cultural heritage and heritage management within the business. Above all, it is has helped to incorporate the view that built environments are in fact cultural landscapes, often building on previous layers, including Aboriginal occupation. This engenders a renewed respect for the environment and indeed supports an integrated approach to managing heritage, both historic and Aboriginal.

Introduction

As successor to the Melbourne and Metropolitan Board of Works (MMBW) established in 1891 and responsible for a vast network of assets built during Melbourne’s formative years, Melbourne Water has inherited a rich and diverse portfolio of heritage assets. Today many of these assets are afforded legislative protection through statutory listing on the Victorian Heritage Register, the Victorian Heritage Inventory, the Victorian Aboriginal Heritage Register and in local Heritage Overlays.

In Melbourne (the State capital of Victoria, Australia), the provision of water supply was among the first essential services to be built in the early days of colonial Victoria commencing with the Yan Yean system (1853-1857). One-hundred-and-sixty years on, the Yan Yean system remains an integral part of Melbourne’s water supply system. The Yan Yean story epitomises the legacy that Melbourne Water has been entrusted to upkeep by way of protecting and conserving its unique heritage for future generations, with a sense of obligation, custodianship and stewardship.
Heritage Asset Management

While it has long been a corporate goal at Melbourne Water to protect and preserve our cultural heritage and despite heritage legislation being in place for decades, the reality is that until development of a Cultural Heritage Strategy (2008), Melbourne Water largely addressed heritage on an ad hoc project basis. Typically, it was managed as an afterthought during project delivery rather than an integral part of asset management and planning; simply a case of good luck rather than good management. In hindsight, this approach was relative to the operating environment and level of awareness of the day, at a time when arguably, heritage management was neither widely recognised nor understood as it is today, particularly in an industrial heritage context.

A project based approach to heritage is inherently risky. Where heritage is not considered in the initial project scoping only to surface during project delivery, it can be a case of good luck rather than good management. At other times, heritage can be sacrificed perhaps unwittingly through a pre-emptive approach, whereby heritage is considered upfront but framed around pre-determined project outcomes. For instance, demolishing a structure only to perhaps be rebuilt elsewhere as a means of interpretation could actually be tokenistic thereby raising rhetorical questions such as: Was it actually necessary to demolish the structure? Could the structure somehow have been integrated into the new design through adaptive re-use? Fundamentally, under what circumstances would heritage values be the primary focus and preservation the objective? A project based approach is also likely to result in heritage assets, particularly linear assets such as pipelines and aqueducts, being treated as fragmented elements in the context of the project scope rather than being seen in their historical context and considered on a ‘whole of system’ basis.

This ‘fragmentation’ is best exemplified by a number of places and objects currently listed on the aforementioned registers. Some of these individual places and objects are in fact an integral part of much bigger systems of historical significance that merit recognition as a whole but due to the basis of identification – often through municipal heritage studies – have been assessed or nominated in a piece-meal fashion.

Prior to inclusion of the Yan Yean Water Supply System (in its entirety) on the Victorian Heritage Register in 2010, many components of the system were listed on various registers years earlier and were therefore isolated and out of context. Similarly the case with Heritage Overlays, where listings of structures and auxiliary components associated with historic linear assets are fragmented by virtue of municipal boundaries.

While primarily compliant, this past project-based approach has no doubt resulted in missed opportunities in achieving better heritage outcomes, for instance through interpretation and adaptive re-use. One consolation, however, is that very little loss has been sustained by virtue of the fact that many of the historic components of Melbourne Water’s network remain in operation, and are therefore maintained.

The lack of co-ordination and integration in a piece-meal approach inherently leads to duplication and inefficient use of physical and financial resources. Potentially the same heritage assets, particularly linear assets, can be assessed repeatedly in each of a series of projects over time. Importantly, this could also compromise the integrity of historic fabric, if not loss, if management decisions on heritage assets are based on individual project outcomes.

Service agencies with control of heritage assets, particularly if listed, have a second service obligation. While they use these assets in delivering their primary service, they are also responsible for the custodianship of the assets and protection of their cultural significance for present and future generations. This second obligation is what must be understood and embraced by Melbourne Water as a whole to ensure the integration of heritage and asset management.

The history and heritage values intrinsic in much of Melbourne Water’s asset base, and its custody thereof, adds an important new dimension to the business, particularly through its asset management strategies and policies. To meet this challenge of integration, Melbourne
Water first recognised the need for a shift in the organisation’s mindset to ensure cultural heritage and cultural heritage management are understood, as only then, could heritage be embraced and integrated into Melbourne Water’s core business.

**Cultural Heritage Strategy**

To implement this organisational shift for Melbourne Water, the development of the Cultural Heritage Strategy aimed to move the business from project-based heritage assessments to ‘whole of system’ assessments that could be more effectively integrated into asset management plans and strategies.

The Strategy sets in place a framework to guide the business through various processes to identify its risks, set priorities and importantly, understand its responsibilities. A stand out benefit of the strategy is that over time, Melbourne Water will have in place a comprehensive history and record of its various systems. This method is showcased through a number of case studies.

**Case Studies**

The following case studies illustrate how susceptible cultural heritage is to either loss or harm through a project based approach, despite in some cases heritage being considered upfront, and how the commissioning of Conservation Management Plans helped Melbourne Water to more comprehensively understand its heritage asset base and provide a foundation for best practice planning and conservation heritage management.

**Yan Yean Water Supply System Conservation Management Plan (CMP)**

Built in 1853, the Yan Yean water supply scheme (Melbourne’s first engineered system), comprising Yan Yean reservoir and associated aqueduct and pipeline infrastructure, is remarkable in that much of the historically significant scheme is still in use today.

In 2003, Melbourne Water undertook to replace sections of the original pipeline (the M57 Morang-Preston main) at critical road crossings following a major pipe failure and road collapse. Although listed on the Victorian Heritage Register, Melbourne Water was granted a permit to remove sections of the pipe so that replacement works could proceed. A condition of the permit required archaeological monitoring and documentation of sample sections of the pipe.

In 2006, however, when Melbourne Water proposed to replace the balance of this water main, Heritage Victoria refused to issue another permit. Instead, it imposed a permit condition to undertake a Conservation Management Plan (CMP) covering the entire Yan Yean water supply system (‘whole of system’). Such a plan would enable the heritage significance of the pipes proposed for replacement to be assessed, and allow management policies to be developed in the context of the whole system, thereby instigating a shift from a project based approach to one of integration. This requirement had not been foreseen by Melbourne Water and was not factored into the project cost. However, this was a turning point, a welcome one for heritage, marking the start of changes in the operating environment with led to increasing expectations for an integrated approach to heritage management.

*The Yan Yean Water Supply System Conservation Management Plan* (Context 2007b) took time and required $100,000 of additional funds. To avoid costly delays to the construction programme, Heritage Victoria agreed that the CMP could be developed concurrently with construction works, as the heritage permit included many other conditions such as archaeological monitoring and recording during the construction works.

**Outcomes**

The CMP was awarded the 2007 (inaugural) Planning Institute of Australia (Victoria) Award for Planning Excellence in Heritage. *The Yan Yean Water Supply System Conservation Management Plan (2007)* has come to serve as a template for all Melbourne Water commissioned conservation management plans.

The CMP considers the Yan Yean system as an integrated whole rather than a series of separate
parts. It demonstrates the shift from the past practice of undertaking individual heritage assessments, to a more comprehensive and integrated approach. The policies in the CMP are written in plain English, designed to guide Melbourne Water staff in combining careful conservation with the adaptation and change needed to continue the safe and efficient operation of the system. Finally, the CMP provides a framework to ensure that heritage issues are considered upfront in planning for system upgrades and maintenance works, which serves as a guide to achieving the ongoing balance between service delivery and conservation.

**Melbourne Regional Water Supply Heritage Study**

As a natural extension to the *Victorian Water Supply Heritage Study* (Context 2007a) commissioned by Heritage Victoria in 2007, Melbourne Water in partnership with Heritage Victoria commissioned the *Regional Water Supply Heritage Study: Melbourne Region* (Context: 2009) to identify those sites that reflect important aspects of the Melbourne region’s water supply heritage.

**Outcomes**

This study provides a tool for Melbourne Water and Heritage Victoria to make informed decisions in consultation with other key stakeholders, about how the places and objects associated with the historic development of Melbourne’s water supply may be identified, assessed and managed to ensure that they are conserved for future generations.

This study is particularly important as the operation of Melbourne’s water supply evolved from a single agency in the MMBW to four agencies through the process of segregation in 1994 resulting in the restructure of Melbourne’s water industry into the following agencies: Melbourne Water (Wholesaler) and three retail companies-City West Water, South East Water and Yarra Valley Water. This process resulted in the split of assets based on functionality. Melbourne Water inherited the vast majority of assets built during the formative years of Melbourne. Accordingly, it makes sense for Melbourne Water to take stewardship of this heritage.

With much of the water supply infrastructure facing complex pressures, including those associated with climate change, and the ability to meet future water supply needs, Melbourne Water invited the retail water companies to participate in this study as a capacity building venture. Importantly, this would ensure an overall coordinated approach to something that would otherwise be fragmented by virtue of service boundaries.

The retail water companies were each engaged one-on-one with the consultant and supplied with copies of the study, thereby making them aware of the heritage values of components of their respective networks, either functioning or decommissioned. Importantly, the exercise helped build capacity in Heritage Victoria to better understand operational constraints on service agencies.

In particular, this study highlights the importance of an inter-governmental approach through partnership in achieving value adding outcomes that may otherwise not be possible through limited resourcing and capacity or indeed service boundaries. Also, what is demonstrated is the importance of a whole of system approach in establishing an initial baseline understanding of the whole system, which in turn helps to identify and set priorities in relation to future detailed studies of individual systems, namely through CMPs.

**Western Treatment Plant Conservation Management Plan**

Melbourne Water’s Western Treatment Plant at Werribee is a significant public asset which has been in operation for over one hundred years. Built in 1894 and occupying over 10,000 ha, it is a historic site of great importance to Melbourne’s development.

In 2000, Melbourne Water commissioned the *Western Treatment Plant – Werribee Conservation Management Plan* (Lovell Chen 2007) with the view to demolishing a number of disused buildings considered to pose a high risk to site operations because of asbestos contamination. Ordinarily, the commissioning of a CMP is seen as a proactive measure and any organisation should be commended for showing such initiative. Unfortunately, in this case
the scope for the CMP was restricted to the buildings earmarked for demolition (i.e. within the project scope) rather than the historical context of the site as a whole.

Best practice heritage management is defined through *The Australia ICOMOS Charter for Places of Cultural Significance, The Burra Charter, 2013* (*Burra Charter*), a guiding document used by heritage practitioners and endorsed by heritage agencies across Australia. Based on *The Burra Charter* guidelines, the scope of the CMP should have been the whole 10,000 ha site, not just those buildings proposed for demolition. While of little individual significance, many of the buildings earmarked for demolition were intrinsic to the history of the site. Arguably, the pre-emptive nature of this approach framed around an end result of demolition was fraught with risk. It did not achieve a well-considered heritage assessment or management plan, and the management recommendations were not clear. In hindsight, this was symptomatic of Melbourne Water’s project-based approach to heritage at the time.

Realising these shortcomings, in 2007, Melbourne Water decided to review the CMP. By this time, there was greater awareness and understanding of heritage management within Melbourne Water through the experience of projects such as the Yan Yean CMP, development of the Cultural Heritage Strategy and closer liaison with Heritage Victoria and other stakeholders, resulting in the building of capacity and being more informed.

**Outcomes**

The review of the CMP was completed in 2008, providing a significance assessment for all of the historic features across the whole complex and outlining clear management recommendations. This CMP followed the structure of the CMP developed for Yan Yean, thus developing a consistent management approach that can progressively be extended across the whole of Melbourne Water’s network. Overall, the CMP is now a more robust and workable management framework for staff to use, and importantly, it follows best management practice as prescribed by *The Burra Charter*.

A more considered approach from the outset could have avoided the expense of duplication through reviewing the original CMP. Above all, the review helped build a business case for the retention and conservation of buildings and structures that would otherwise have been demolished solely on the basis of safety risks they posed by way of asbestos. Additionally, the CMP has come to inform a Master Plan for the Western Treatment Plant historic precinct that will help integrate the historic landscape features with any future development works on the Plant.

**Operating Environment**

**Legislation**

In Victoria, the introduction of the Aboriginal Heritage Act (2006) and Regulations (2007) coupled with government strategies and initiatives such as the former Victorian Heritage Strategy, are fast changing operating parameters for government agencies and the development industry alike.

In particular, the Aboriginal Heritage Act (2006) and Aboriginal Heritage Regulations (2007) have introduced new dynamics in the sphere of cultural heritage management. The appointment of Registered Aboriginal Parties (RAPs) alone adds a new dimension to regulatory compliance and stakeholder engagement with greater focus on relationships and partnerships, placing an emphasis on heritage outcomes as a legacy for future generations beyond the scope of individual projects. The challenge to comply with the new model of heritage management is not insurmountable; rather it’s a case of identifying ‘opportunities in the challenge’.

**Corporate History**

History provides the context for appreciating the heritage values attached to places and objects and helps explain why and how the past has meaning in the present. For this reason, Melbourne Water’s rich corporate history provides the historical context to the many heritage assets in its management. Much of Melbourne Water’s infrastructure was built during the formative years
of Melbourne from the mid-nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century. Accordingly, this network is intrinsically linked to the city of Melbourne’s history and its relationship to water as a resource and the lifeblood of the city.

Additionally, for over one hundred years, Melbourne Water’s predecessor, the MMBW, serviced metropolitan Melbourne with water, sewerage and drainage services. The MMBW progressively took on new roles such as caring for rivers and creeks, creating metropolitan parks, disposing of industrial waste, town planning and the building of freeways. The legacy is evident in the high standard of living enjoyed by Melburnians today.

In 1991 the MMBW merged with a number of district water boards to form Melbourne Water. Further restructuring followed in 1994 with Melbourne Water becoming the wholesaler providing bulk water to and treating bulk sewerage with the three retail water companies providing water and sewerage services to households. Today, Melbourne Water manages Melbourne’s water supply catchments, removes and treats most of Melbourne’s sewage, and manages rivers and creeks and major drainage systems throughout the Port Phillip and Westernport regions. However, very few understand the responsibility it now has in heritage management and in particular in responding to its own history and place in the community.

For organisations with such a rich corporate history as Melbourne Water, these resources can also play an important role in shaping organisational identity and defining their place in the community. For example, Melbourne Water’s participation in the City of Whittlesea Cultural Heritage Program gives members of the community access to historically significant areas such as the water catchments, which are otherwise closed to the public. This programme is an opportunity to educate the community on the historical development of the water supply system thereby contextualising current day operations.

Importantly, these programmes were borne out of controversy sparked by a Melbourne Water project to upgrade the historic Toorourrong Reservoir in 2010. Balancing service delivery and conservation was put to the test with the need to upgrade the dam embankment wall and replace historic bluestone and granite structures to meet the Australian National Committee on Large Dams (ANCOLD) guidelines. The project instigated a campaign showcasing how much heritage is valued by the community, often due to familial connections with these assets.

Accordingly, not only is cultural heritage management an integral part of core business, it is intrinsic to Melbourne Water’s corporate branding and public image. To this day, many people including past employees and communities continue to associate with the organisation and its predecessors through their connections with Melbourne Water’s assets.

“I retired from the MMBW on 11th August 1982, completing thirty-six-years of service. I enjoyed my time in the Board and since joining the Retired MMBW Officers Association; we have been introduced to friendly Melbourne Water staff, enjoyed the facilities of Head Office and have participated in field excursions to view Melbourne Water projects.

I witness reports of Melbourne Water activities in the media and am proud of the way the construction techniques are developing and feel a degree of pride in my modest contribution.
This crest was given to me about 20 years ago and I have displayed it proudly on an external wall at my home, where it has long been an item of interest to all. I knew that I was only a temporary custodian of this artefact and am now happy to hand it back to Melbourne Water knowing its future home is assured”. Vin Bool

Implementation of Cultural Heritage Action Plan (Melbourne Water’s Response)

To implement and realise the organisational shift required, Melbourne Water remains guided by its Cultural Heritage Strategy, which sets the overall heritage management direction and articulates its vision and commitment. Central to this is the Action Plan comprising objectives designed to ensure a continuing balance between the twin objectives of service delivery and conservation, framed by legislation and community and stakeholder expectations. This can be at times a difficult balance to achieve.

While the strategy guides the approach in terms of legislative requirements, where possible, Melbourne Water remains committed to going beyond compliance to fulfil its stewardship obligations in relation to the protection and conservation of heritage resources in its custody that are not necessarily afforded formal protection under legislation, but are relevant to its history or indeed the community. Importantly, this approach is consistent with the direction set in the former Victorian Heritage Strategy (Heritage Victoria 2006), which articulated five key steps for the effective management of heritage assets by government agencies:

1. Have a strategy
2. Develop an inventory
3. Get the appropriate expertise
4. Apply management principles

All five key actions are embodied in the strategic objectives outlined in Melbourne Water’s Action Plan which guides the implementation of the Cultural Heritage Strategy. Alignment with these high-level government agency guidelines further reinforces Melbourne Water’s commitment to working toward ‘best practice’ heritage management.

Melbourne Water’s Action Plan

The multi-dimensional nature of cultural heritage management is not too dissimilar to a jigsaw puzzle. Therefore, central to implementing the Cultural Heritage Strategy is the Action Plan. This plan comprises four key strategic objectives, each with a programme of actions and activities to be undertaken each year over the term of the strategy (2008-11). These objectives include:

1. Integrating Cultural Heritage Management into the business.
2. Building relationships with stakeholders as partners in cultural heritage management.
3. Improving Melbourne Water’s cultural heritage information base.
4. Sharing Melbourne Water’s cultural heritage with the community.

Melbourne Water’s Action Plan Objectives

Integrating Cultural Heritage Management into the business is the crux of the challenge and it supports Melbourne Water’s philosophy. Outcomes centre on education about Melbourne Water’s cultural heritage resources (Aboriginal and historic) and the legal obligations associated with their management, ensuring greater understanding and awareness of cultural heritage and heritage management across the business. A number of actions are specified.

1. Formation of a Heritage Focus Group: comprising staff from across the business to support implementation of the strategy. Benefits include:
   - greater support from across the business, hence ownership of the strategy
   - increasing capacity of the business through in-house expertise and importantly sharing of knowledge and experiences
• bridging knowledge gaps and identifying business needs to guide and inform development of policies, guidelines and procedures, thereby setting in place the support framework for staff and contractors
• improving co-ordination of heritage related activities across the business, thereby avoiding the duplication inherent in past practices

2. Training and development programmes: as Melbourne Water’s asset base includes both Aboriginal and historic cultural heritage, training focuses on two key areas:
• Aboriginal cultural awareness to build a better understanding and appreciation of Aboriginal history and operational aspects of the Aboriginal Heritage Act and Regulations. Importantly, this helps set the human context to the legislative framework.
• Regulatory compliance concerning both historic and Aboriginal cultural heritage using internal guidelines and processes–risk management.

3. Development of guidelines, processes and procedures: This will ensure proper integration while helping build capacity within the business and complements the above initiative.

4. Building relationships with our stakeholders as partners in cultural heritage management: this new model changes the focus of existing stakeholder relationships from one of compliance (“we have to”) to commitment (“we want to”); a simple ethos underpinned by engagement, whereby good engagement facilitates compliance. This is in recognition that working more collaboratively and in partnership with other stakeholders brings a multitude of benefits: sharing of resources both financial and physical; mutual understanding of business needs and constraints; alignment of business goals in relation to heritage outcomes; and importantly mutual capacity building. These are all opportunities not otherwise possible by working in isolation. Three actions are specified.

5. Commissioning of joint heritage studies: to date Melbourne Water has commissioned several heritage studies and conservation management plans actively involving stakeholder agencies, thereby ensuring a holistic approach, that is ‘whole of system’ and ‘intergovernmental’, recognising layers of interests overlapping some of Melbourne Water’s assets.

6. Wurundjeri Country Plan (‘Narrap’): The Wurundjeri Tribe Land and Compensation Cultural Heritage Council (‘Wurundjeri’) has received funding under the Australian Government’s Caring for our Country programme to develop Narrap (Wurundjeri TL&CCHC: 2010) as a means of facilitating the Wurundjeri community having greater access to and involvement in the caring for their Country. It is a unique collaboration involving many land management agencies as partners including Port Phillip Westernport Catchment Authority, Parks Victoria and Melbourne Water.


8. Improving Melbourne Water’s cultural heritage information base: Over the term of the current strategy, Melbourne Water has set in place a programme of studies and conservation management plans to determine the heritage values of its asset base, thereby creating a planning framework that enables project and asset managers to consider heritage upfront, and thus make informed decisions. It is essentially a risk management tool. This will deliver a number of significant benefits, including minimising duplication of heritage assessments on assets, improving co-ordination between asset managers and project managers and improving data management. As a new way of working, this is an important change from a reactive approach (project-based) to a pro-active approach (whole of system). The commissioning of heritage assessments, area studies and conservation management plans ahead of infrastructure projects will ensure heritage values and heritage management issues are well understood and can be integrated into works and maintenance planning with little or no disruption. Regional studies and conservation management Plans (CMPs) recently completed or underway, include:
• Yan Yean Water Supply System CMP
• Regional Water Supply Heritage Study: Melbourne region
• Maroondah Water Supply System CMP
• O’Shannassy/Upper Yarra/Silvan Water Supply Systems CMP
• Western Treatment Plant CMP
• Regional Sewerage Heritage Study: Melbourne region

9. Sharing Melbourne Water’s cultural heritage with the community: Melbourne Water is committed to acknowledging and documenting important stories that relate to the land, history and assets it manages. Initiatives include:
   • historical accounts of experiences and events as recalled by individuals
   • oral histories
   • biographies recognising the contribution of influential predecessors.

To date, Melbourne Water has sponsored and supported wide ranging community projects linked to its past:
   • Melbourne Water sponsored a biography on the first Engineer-in-Chief of the MMBW: William Thwaites: Engineer to Marvellous Melbourne (La Nauze 2011).
   • Melbourne Water sponsored an account of Shirley Tunaley growing up in the construction town for the Upper Yarra Dam project, entitled Upper Yarra Dam: A 1950s construction town (Tunaley 2007).
   • City of Whittlesea-Cultural Heritage Program: Tour of Yan Yean system provided the opportunity for engaged learning with the community.

Conclusion

Melbourne Water’s Cultural Heritage Strategy embodies a participatory approach to meeting the new paradigm for heritage protection. It is an ongoing process and very much a journey of collective learning but also self-discovery for Melbourne Water. It has helped frame the context to legislation and stakeholder expectations around its corporate history and heritage, thereby defining its place as custodian, not just service provider. Now present within the organisation is a heightened awareness of the built and natural environments as cultural landscapes; same eyes but different outlook.

While Melbourne Water’s approach to cultural heritage management may not be the panacea for all organisations it is, however, a robust and structured approach founded on the first and most fundamental heritage asset management principle – have a strategy in place. Melbourne Water has achieved this and is well-advanced with other strategy objectives, thus ensuring the long-term protection of its cultural heritage resources for the benefit of current and future generations.

The Cultural Heritage Strategy has been the first crucial step to helping Melbourne Water integrate heritage management as core business, particularly asset management. It launches a new era in heritage management for the business, setting in place a management framework that ensures long term success through sustainable outcomes while meeting the twin objectives of service delivery and conservation.

This has shaped the Strategy to be holistic in nature with principles and objectives framed around both tangible and intangible values. The ethos is one of engagement driving compliance to secure sustainable outcomes with the view of managing legacies for future generations. In the long term, success for Melbourne Water will largely be measured by:
   • a comprehensive understanding of the heritage values intrinsic within its asset base
   • having in place management plans for their ongoing care
   • ongoing collaborations with various stakeholders as partners in heritage management.
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