Norfolk Island and community consultation

Jean Rice
The Kingston and Arthurs Vale Historic Area (KAVHA), Norfolk Island (NI) is now part of the Australian Convict Sites World Heritage Property but has been managed as a historic site since 1973. The area includes land in private and public ownership and subject to commercial, administrative, rural, residential and recreational uses.

At the time of the original proposal, there was community opposition to World Heritage listing and in a 1998 referendum, 64% of islanders voted against the nomination. In a letter to the editor in 2006 a local was concerned about ‘giving’ land to World Heritage and that ‘restrictions … will stop you and I, and our children, enjoying what is ours’. Reasons for this opposition included: suspicion of authorities, dislike of outside interference, a perception that recognition of convict heritage would be at the expense of community values, concern about loss of control and concern about interference with business enterprises and land use.

In 2006 the community was consulted about revision of the Conservation Management Plan (later Heritage Management Plan – HMP), particularly social values and people’s stories. The team included Kristal Buckley (specialist consultant), Jodie Brown (planner from NI) and Jean Rice.

![Figure 1: This 2006 cross cut in grass on a private property in KAVHA, and under the airport approach, was a clear expression of opposition to National and World Heritage listing. (Source: Jean Rice)](image)
Rice (member of the CMP team). It was decided to extend this to include consultation and provision of information about possible National and World Heritage listing.

The consultation involved a two-week programme with Commonwealth Government Department representatives available for the second week. The main venue was a local hall. The programme included individual appointments, focus groups, meetings with and talks at community organisations, stalls at the food mall and market, and informal discussions. Community information bulletins were produced and publicity included official NI government notices, newspaper articles, radio interviews, and letters to landholders and interest groups.

Follow up articles addressed concerns such as:

- Can we still use the area, for example, cricket? (yes)
- Will there be entry fees? (no)
- Can I still fish and camp? (yes)
- Will the cemetery continue to be used for burials? (yes)

Was consultation successful? There was strong support from some people and generally positive and genuine interest, but attendance was not high. No strong opposition was expressed during the consultation, but immediately after an article in the local paper was headlined ‘Commonwealth Land Grab’. Local values were subsequently included in the CMP/HMP, which identified community use as part of cultural significance and encouraged use of the local language and similar outcomes.

The subsequent KAVHA site manager commented that he believed that the consultation was useful and prepared people for World Heritage listing. He noted the importance of demystifying and of a simple pro-active approach with face-to-face contact.

The enshrining of local and social values in the management plan and listings has proved positive with a gradual realisation that community values were supported. There has also been improved presentation from some tour operators.

The site manager also noted that soon after World Heritage Listing was achieved (in July 2010) an informal online poll showed 64% support and 12% against (i.e. many were undecided). More recent figures were 91% support and 7% against. These figures indicate a change after the actual experience of listing and adoption of the revised CMP/HMP, rather than as a result of consultation.

According to the site manager, initially there was an increased proportion of NI tourists who reported visiting KAVHA and some evidence of change to ‘higher yielding’ tourists. However the expectation of increased overall tourism after World Heritage listing has not been realised. In fact tourist numbers have fallen dramatically, possibly in part due to the global financial crisis, disappointing many that supported listing, and negatively affecting the island economy.