Understanding Cultural Routes

1 Purpose

This Practice Note illustrates the application of the concept of cultural routes in Australia and the Asia Pacific region.

Cultural routes make up the connective web of the world's heritage, tying local places, regions, countries and global cultures together. They are the result of humans travelling across the environment, exchanging ideas and goods over long distances and time spans.

This practice note is for practitioners with a particular interest in working with cultural routes at all levels from local to global.

Scope

This Practice Note covers:

1. Purpose
2. Concepts, Definitions and Principles
3. Common Issues in understanding Cultural Routes
4. Resources

2 Concepts, Definitions and Principles

The concept of cultural routes is expansive and dynamic.

Cultural routes can traverse vast distances across a continent or link a country with other peoples. Travellers along cultural routes journey on land, water and increasingly by air. These innumerable travellers have left a heritage of routes and journeys that is imprinted in landscapes and seascapes, records and living memory. Cultural routes have linked Australia with Asia and beyond for centuries.

At the global level the formal definition of cultural routes under the Operational Guidelines to the World Heritage Convention draws attention to the following essential elements. They are:

- **context** – the relationship between a cultural route and its natural environment and landscape setting
- **content** – both the tangible, physical elements and the intangible aspects which give sense and meaning to a historic route
- **cross cultural significance** – the connection of peoples and the sharing of ideas which gives a historic route a special richness and depth of significance
- **dynamic quality** – the spatial dimensions and historic depth of repeated journeys back and forth combine to create a distinctive cultural route.
The term cultural route refers to the whole route, which typically has a value over and above the sum of its elements, together with a dynamic quality, through which it gains its cultural significance. These principles can be applied at a state/territory/province, national and global level. In a national context cultural routes relate to all aspects of Australia’s diverse land and seascapes, as well as its myriad identities.

3 Common Issues in understanding Cultural Routes

This section provides guidance about a range of issues that may arise when recognising and managing cultural routes.

Issue: Recognising the Dynamic Qualities of Cultural Routes

An essential element of many cultural routes is their dynamic quality.

Guidance:

The spatial dimensions and historic depth of repeated journeys back and forth combine to create a distinctive cultural route. An aspect of this is often cross-cultural significance – the connection of peoples and the sharing of ideas that give a historic route a special richness and depth of significance. Methods of identifying and recording cultural routes need to embrace the idea of dynamism in the processes of documenting, assessing and managing this form of heritage item.

Issue: Recognising the Context and Content of Cultural Routes

The contextual relationship between a cultural route and its natural environment and landscape setting is often overlooked, as is the relationship between physical elements and the intangible aspects.

Guidance:

When identifying a cultural route it is important to consider and document its natural environment and landscape setting and the ways these attributes give shape and character to the route. Consideration should be given to including a natural heritage specialist in the identification process.

It is also important to identify and recognise the tangible physical elements and intangible aspects and relationships that give sense and meaning to the cultural route. The use of historic themes may assist in documenting the context and content of cultural routes.

Issue: Understanding Intangible Meanings

Recording a cultural route means working with communities along the route to understand the meanings, stories and other intangible aspects of the route.
Guidance:

Many cultural routes are valued by communities because they:

- connect them to other places, people and ideas
- illustrate the movement of people and the exchange of ideas
- hold myths, legends and meanings, both spiritual and symbolic
- are highly regarded for their continuity and/or changes of use
- illustrate societies’ use and exchanges of resources, technologies and beliefs.

Practitioners collaborating with communities need to explore thoroughly such values by drawing on community knowledge and appropriate disciplinary perspectives. Intangible meaning also needs to be incorporated into the management approach.

Issue: Boundaries

It can be difficult to decide on boundaries for a cultural route that encompass its corridor, foci of interest and viewshed.

Guidance:

Recording a cultural route includes documenting the physical elements such as roads, bridges, structures, railways, watering points, signs, moveable objects, storied localities, etc.

Use digital technologies to map and photograph the route, noting that there may be many deviations to the route over time.

Cultural routes are often linear but may also comprise disconnected but related places that, in their entirety, form the route.

Issue: Management

Management and protection of cultural routes will require collaboration between communities, government and practitioners, and may include appropriate statutory protection.

Guidance:

Managing the heritage of cultural routes requires the cooperation of all land and sea managers, often over multiple tenure types, along the route. Cooperation may be required across cultural, geographical and administrative boundaries as routes can be extensive in their entirety.

Respecting and providing for continuity of use may be an important aspect of management. Management should respond to conservation needs and identified threats. It may require the operation of statutory listing processes. Management should be sustainable and provide benefits to local communities.
4 Resources

For case study examples that apply the ideas set out in this practice note see the brochure on Cultural Landscapes and Routes prepared by the Australia ICOMOS National Scientific Committee at:


See also two recent issues of Australia ICOMOS’s Historic Environment on this topic at:


If you are a member of Australia ICOMOS and interested in participating in this subject area through the work of the ICOMOS international scientific committees, see:

http://australia.icomos.org/get-involved/international-scientific-committees/clic-cultural-routes/

Further information on cultural routes globally is available at:

The ICOMOS Charter on Cultural Routes
https://www.icomos.org/images/DOCUMENTS/Charters/culturalroutes_e.pdf

World Heritage Operational Guidelines, pp 76 -77
http://whc.unesco.org/en/guidelines/

If you need help protecting a cultural route contact: www.icomos.org/australia.