Sacred sights and feral tourism management: a brief sortie

This paper considers the impact of tourism on Aboriginal cultural sites, such as rock paintings, drawing examples from the management of the 110 or so sites in and around the Grampians-Gariwerd National Park. However, rather than focus on the immediate characteristics of the painted surface or the rock shelter, the focus in this paper will be to treat these sites as the nuclei of attraction systems that include car parking facilities, walking paths and signage.

Sitenames and markers: ‘...not the signposts but the signs’

To understand rock art sites, Leiper’s ‘tourist attraction system’ is invaluable. In the case of rock-art tourism, Leiper’s attraction system incorporates the following elements: a tourist or the human element; a nucleus or central element – in this case the art site; and a marker or informative element – such as site names, signage and brochures. Markers are defined as items of information or image, about central elements, as received by tourists. Markers are not the media conveying information: they are not the signposts but the signs. Markers may be ‘on-site’ and ‘off-site’ (away from the object of sightseeing).

Site names, as markers, may be conveyed to tourists on brochures and on maps. People planning to visit the Grampians-Gariwerd region acquire knowledge of the park through diverse media, including television, radio, and newspapers, travel guides, tourist information centres, and web sites on the Internet. From this information, knowledge about rock art sites may be obtained and the intention formed to visit a number of sites in the park.

In the case of Aboriginal rock paintings, site names function as markers that link...
tourists to the central elements - the paintings themselves. Because markers have a function that serves to trigger motivation, they often contain information or present an image about what might be experienced at the sites concerned. In the case of a site named ‘Cave of Ghosts’, the name as a marker is likely to convey several messages that relate to the physical characteristics of the site and the nature of the experiences that can be expected there. The fact that the site is not a cave indicates that the marker is deficient.

Another central function of markers is that they enable tourists to form images. Names of nuclei often have positive connotations that affect tourists’ attitudes and the images they form about certain places. This may contribute to motivation and add to satisfaction. Names of destinations such as Costa del Sol and Surfer’s Paradise both create positive connotations and have appeal to certain tourist markets.

MacCannell has suggested that attractions develop in identifiable phases. He argues that as sightseeing objects or sites become the focus of visitors they are given names as ‘the first phase of sight sacralization’. As visitation increases, the site is framed-off and displayed more prominently, a phase he called ‘framing and elevation’. If visitation continues to increase, the site may acquire a sacred reputation, which he calls ‘enshrinement’. The fourth phase is that of ‘duplication’, in which copies or replicas or pictures (i.e. postcards) of the nucleus are made available to tourists.

In the case of indigenous rock-art sites, which are taken to be sacred sights/sites, MacCannell’s description has considerable currency. In the case of the ten public sites in the Grampians-Gariwerd National Park, many have gone through this four-phase process. However, owing to management intervention, many have failed to create the atmosphere that would be expected from such ancient places.

The Grampians-Gariwerd National Park

In 1991, the Victorian Tourism Commission changed the names of ten rock-art sites in and around the Grampians-Gariwerd National Park. One of the motivations for this change was the recognition that there was a relationship between site names and tourist behaviour and that naming was a management tool that could potentially play a role in site protection. Inappropriate names were contributing to visitor dissatisfaction, resulting in vandalism of directional signage and graffiti being left at some sites. An earlier study by Hough and Conole (1987) of graffiti at art sites had highlighted these issues.

At one site, ‘Cave of Fishes’, now known as Larnybinja Shelter, Hough and Conole noted the influence of the name in the kind of graffiti that was occurring at the site; for example, vandals had scratched fish silhouettes and ‘shark-jaw’ cartoons into the rock face. One visitor had renamed the site ‘Cave of Jaws’. Hall and Abrahams believed that tourists, in their annoyance at not seeing fish, had
scratched drawings of fish into the rock. Another graffito was the prosaic comment: 'We came to see this too. Don't feel bad about it!'. Approximately 100 incidents of graffiti were found at the site in 1987. The name had conjured up false expectations as people set out to visit the site, which often resulted in disappointment when they reached their destination.

Gunn has identified the areas surrounding the nuclei or central elements of attractions as comprising two environmental zones he has called 'inviolate belts' and 'zones of closure'. The inviolate belt is the area immediately around a nucleus, through which tourists enter the nucleus and which serves as the location of 'physio-psychological conditioning and reflecting' as the 'mental set or anticipation of the attraction has as much to do with their reception and approval when the feature is reached'. The inviolate belt includes such things as the entrance path, viewing platforms and protective grilles that enclose the paintings on the rock face of the shelters. The inviolate belt corresponds to MacCannell's 'enshrinement' concept. When tourists arrive at a car park, they must use the path to reach the cultural site. The path or the approach is vital, for it conditions the visitor for a certain experience. The mental set or anticipation of an attraction has much to do with visitor reception and approval when the attraction is reached. The zone of closure refers to the area immediately outside the inviolate belt, and in the case of rock art sites, is where the tourist support facilities and services are located: car parks, toilets, picnic areas, interpretation panels and directional signage.

From the viewpoint of the theories of Gunn, Leiper, and MacCannell, the public rock-art sites at the Grampians-Gariwerd National Park were failing as tourist attractions because of several factors. Until the recent changes to site names, many of the sites had names that were dysfunctional. The information conveyed by names such as 'Cave of Fishes', 'Cave of Ghosts', and 'Camp of the Emu's Foot Shelter', gave tourists a certain mental image of what they would see at the sites. The mental set of anticipation these names produced often did not match the physical setting of the art sites and the atmosphere tourists expected to experience did not match the reality of their site visits. Some tourists vented their frustration and disappointment by vandalising the signage, or vandalising the rock face itself.

Enshrinement of art sites is often an attempt at 'site hardening', measures taken to manage visitation as a means of protecting the fabric of the resource itself. The construction of grilles over public rock art sites in the Gariwerd region is a management practice that began in 1937. Primarily, these grilles were constructed to reduce graffiti and other vandalism. They also ensured that feral goats and other animals could not use the shelters and rub themselves against the rock face. At some art sites (Billimina [formerly Glenisla Shelter], Bunjils), the grilles did not enclose every motif, and those outside the grilles were often obliterated by graffiti. Measures have been taken at some shelters to protect occupation deposits and inhibit dust pollution by covering the floors of shelters with clean sand or sealing them with paving stones. At Billimina, where paving stones were laid, children have been observed gathering stones and throwing them; and other visitors - in
trying to avoid walking on the paving stones – have concentrated their movement
around the edge, exposing underlying deposits and creating erosion deposits.

The biological invasion

With Gunn's model, the inviolate belt also includes the physical or ecological
environment that surrounds the rock art. When tourists visit art sites within
national parks, they expect to see and experience native flora and fauna. Biologist
Tim Low's recent text 'Feral Future' presents a sobering analysis of the biological
invasion of Australia of exotic species of plants and animals. He makes the point
that nature-based tourism has the ability to 'ignite ecological explosions' and that
visitors to national parks may rewrite human history through something as
insignificant as a seed on a sock or a spore on a coat. The sign 'Take nothing but
photographs, leave nothing but footprints', has given way to signs that warn that
even our footprints can kill the forest, as the soles of boots are spreading the fungus
phytophthora. In the Grampians-Gariwerd National Park, phytophthora may have
been imported in gravel used to lay roads to improve access.

Weeds along trails in national parks may be attributed to the transportation of their
seeds by people, but also to the transformation of the soils by human effluvia.
Noting research by Jamie Kirkpatrick, Low makes the point that something as
simple as human urine, which fertilises soil, can explain how weeds may gain an
edge. Kirkpatrick found that camping grounds in Tasmania supported urination
rings of annual weeds, where the growth was 'most prolific directly outside the
doors of huts, a comment on Tasmanian weather as well as male night laziness'.
At Bunjils Shelter, management authorities were obliged to install public toilets
because many tourists were making their own arrangements among the many
granite tors in the scenic reserve. Many families have picnics at the reserve and
often go exploring after having visited the art site - it is no surprise that human
waste became a management issue.

In this brief sortie it is obvious that heritage tourism has negative impacts on the
integrity and quality of Aboriginal art sites, despite the best intentions of
management authorities. Management practices have evolved in an attempt to
ensure that tourist visitation is satisfying and sustainable and that the heritage values
of the resource are maintained. Some past management practices, however, have
been found to contribute to site vandalism and damage to the fabric of art sites.
Management is caught in a difficult situation. If sites are not protected or
'enshrined', then they are at risk of being damaged through vandalism and
unrestricted access. Despite the fact that there are over 110 rock art sites in and
around the Grampians-Gariwerd National Park, the Aboriginal communities with
management responsibility have actively resisted any pressure to increase the
number of sites available to tourism. On the contrary, they have decided to
concentrate their management efforts on a select number of the ten public sites, and
ensure that these are available to tourism. Tourists are actively encouraged to visit
these select sites, which contain protective grilles, on-site interpretive signage and,
in some cases, viewing platforms and board walks. Although these management measures compromise the integrity and tourist experience of the rock shelters and the Aboriginal paintings, the Aboriginal community has accepted this as the price to be paid to ensure that 100 or so sites that are excluded from the public domain maintain their cultural integrity.