Laura Gray

A private heritage and conservation consultant, with an honours degree in Architecture and postgraduate Heritage Studies, Laura works predominantly in the wheatbelt region of Western Australia. Under contract to the Heritage Council of Western Australia, she is also the Regional Wheatbelt Heritage Adviser, covering 44 shire areas, working with local government authorities, communities and individuals to identify, understand, conserve, use, develop, interpret and promote their heritage. Community consultation and empowerment is an essential element of the practice in providing advice and undertaking heritage assessments, conservation plans, municipal inventories of heritage places, conservation works, interpretive plans and the promotion of cultural tourism.

Sustainability and survival in the Western Australian wheatbelt

The wheatbelt region of Western Australia is located immediately north, east and south-east of Perth. It covers an area of over 150,000 square metres and has a population of 72,000 people. There are over 125 towns and many community centres throughout the region, which is comprised of 44 local government areas.

Although the region experienced a 1 per cent population-growth in recent years, it was the lowest rural growth region. Historically, the economy of the wheatbelt is based on agriculture, particularly cropping, and although that is diversifying, it is still dominant. Parts of the wheatbelt have experienced alarming population decline in recent decades, initiated by the 'get big or get out' syndrome of the prosperous and progressive 1960s and 1970s. Less 'manpower' is required on the farms and families have moved to larger regional centres or the city for greater employment and education opportunities. Communities in the wheatbelt are in crisis.

In contrast, some of the fastest developing local government areas in the state are in the Avon Valley (east of Perth, in the wheatbelt) in York, Chittering, Toodyay and in the north coastal areas. Larger towns close to the city are more economically sustainable than smaller remote centres. Over 90 per cent of the wheatbelt towns have populations of fewer than 500 people. Most single metropolitan shires have a greater population than the entire 44 shires in the wheatbelt.

Tourism opportunities

Tourism contributes only 1.8 per cent of the economy of the wheatbelt. Figures for the year 1996 indicated an annual increase of 15 per cent, with over 700,000 visitors (not including unknown figures for private day-trippers). Only 1200 people were employed in culture and recreational services, accommodation, cafés and restaurants.

Economic sustainability of any community is the underlying foundation for survival. The opportunities for 'Cultural Tourism' are enormous. The economic benefits of tourism are well researched and documented. Australians are a mobile, ageing population. Current research indicates that travellers are looking for new and different experiences, and rural towns have the potential to satisfy the search for identity and experiences.

The wheatbelt has a unique identity. It epitomises the nostalgic stereotype of what it is to be Australian. The cultural environment of the towns and regions tells what it is today, what it was, and what the future holds. People are the main ingredient in making places special, for whatever reason. The heritage buildings, new buildings and vacant lots tell stories of development and priorities and the people who make that place. Every town has a similar set of buildings, but each place has a different history of associations, events and developments that fit into the history of the town: that in turn is part of the story of the region.
The history of settlement in the wheatbelt is similar throughout the region, with the beginnings of exploration, pastoral use of the land as well as sandalwood cutting. The sandalwood cutters trekked throughout the wheatbelt, and when gold was discovered in the Southern Cross region in the late 1880s, the tracks proved useful for the gold seekers. Survival was always dependent on water, or the lack of it. The huge population explosion brought by the 1890s gold rushes resulted in government providing incentives to take up agricultural land and sustain the economy and population. The subsequent development of the wheatbelt region was facilitated by railway infrastructure.

Railways determined the survival of an agricultural community in the early days. Intensive lobbying took place in most areas, and communities often formed progress associations to lobby for the benefit of their community. They lobbied for water supplies, schools, mail services, railways, roads and halls. As late as the 1960s, new land in the south-east of the wheatbelt was opened for selection and settlement. Wheatbelt communities have always co-operated for the benefit of all: that is what wheatbelt survival is about. It seems that the smaller the community the more spirited and co-operative they are to ensure their survival.

**Community involvement**

In response to the 1990 Heritage Act, every local government in Western Australia has completed or is currently undertaking a Municipal Inventory of Heritage Places (heritage survey).

To be successful, the process relies on positive community involvement in identifying that which is valued as heritage. Those involved are enriched by the experience, develop a sense of ownership, and therefore an ongoing interest in the outcomes. The inventory is the foundation of a process of building community pride and awareness of their cultural heritage. Such awareness produces pro-active community support for heritage and conservation. It is an important community planning resource, laying the foundations for future opportunities and providing for the realisation of a strong sense of identity.

Community interest and the use of a place are implicit in regaining appreciation and conservation of a place. In some cases, conserving heritage places is actually a process of conserving communities. With the empowerment of the community, the sense of ownership results in community pride and raised awareness of their own unique identity and pro-active conservation or interpretation.

Listing a place on the municipal inventory is about recognition and management of assets. Conservation is not about creating museums: it is about continuing to value the heritage place as a part of the current and future environment. It is not about stopping development: it is about ensuring that it is appropriate, with full consideration and an understanding of the heritage value of a place.
Finding a viable and appropriate function for a place should be a direct response to community requirements, energy, enthusiasm, opportunities and vision; it should also reflect regional issues and ensure survival.

Heritage funding opportunities are an important factor, but not the total answer to long term conservation. Two million dollars are available annually through two current grants programs in Western Australia. The Heritage Council’s grants program targets owners of registered places, private and otherwise. The Lotteries Commission targets properties owned or managed by local governments and non-profit organisations. Both funding bodies require proper conservation processes and fund conservation plans as a prerequisite to final works funding. Funding is an important impetus to facilitate proper conservation planning and to establish an understanding of correct processes. It also serves to enthuse the local community when they can see some reward for their efforts.

Every area has government-owned places such as post offices (commonwealth), railway, police, fire services, education facilities (state). As government departments continue to rationalise and privatise, local governments and communities are coming under increasing pressure to take responsibility for those heritage assets. The State Government disposal process requires that any place built before 1940 must undergo a heritage assessment prior to government sale or development of a property. Although this serves to recognise places of state significance, responsibility is still relegated to a local level.

Railway stations, water towers, barracks, platforms, goods sheds, lines, turntables and railway dams are being demolished and disposed of by the government railway authority at an alarming rate. Local governments and communities lack the resources to take over the places, use them, manage or maintain them despite valuing their heritage significance. Post offices are privatised, and banks have made a mass exodus from rural areas, leaving a trail of empty buildings. Similarly, fire stations are becoming obsolete as new emergency services buildings are funded throughout the region, and community recreational centres supersede town halls. Recreation centres are often located on the outskirts of towns and contribute to the further demise of the town centres.

Wheatbelt communities, outside the handful of towns over 1000 people, are struggling to sustain a level of service and community amenities. The towns have assets that are not productive, often half of any town’s buildings may be vacant, but the communities are reluctant to lose their towns – their heritage – their identity.

**Conservation and community-based tourism initiatives**

There is a positive trend towards tourism in the region, as people begin to recognise the importance of the industry and the opportunities afforded by it.
A number of regional community-based tourism organisations have been established, comprising up to five or six local government areas working in a co-operative manner. The regional approach is slowly being accepted as the means to facilitate tourist travel into a particular area, by linking resources, promoting a package of events and experiences and presenting each unique heritage experience and individual town identity on the journey.

Many accommodation services have been established in the form of farm stays and bed-and-breakfasts. The provision of services and accommodation can begin to account for the conservation and re-use of some heritage places.

A number of tourism opportunities currently exist in the wheatbelt, interestingly based on the natural environment: Wave Rock, the Pinnacles and the wildflowers. Wave Rock at Hyden, 3.5 hours drive east-south-east of Perth, attracts hundreds of thousands of tourists a year. They travel by coach direct to Wave Rock and back to Perth. At this stage, there is only one community that has tapped into that lucrative market, and they serve morning and afternoon teas in the local hall in the small town of Babakin, with a population of approximately twenty people. A community in Wamunusking has restored and interpreted a rabbit trap on the No. 2 rabbit proof fence. It is a four hour return trip away from Perth, and on a deviated route to Wave Rock. A restored cottage in Kondinin, on the road to and from Wave Rock, retails antiques and cottage crafts. It has no support facilities. The opportunities on the Wave Rock route and surrounding areas are enormous and as yet unrealised.

In the northern section of the wheatbelt the wildflower trail primarily attracts people on the way home to Perth after being north for the winter, enticing them on an inland route to see the spring wildflowers. That is about all it offers. A few enterprising communities promote their heritage, like the wheatbin at Wubin, staffed by volunteers several hours a day, every day. Ballidu have established a successful contemporary art gallery in their former Masonic Lodge. They need regional support to offer their regular clientele an option of interesting journeys.

The Golden Pipeline, a National Trust of Australia (WA) initiative proposes to link the communities along the Perth to Kalgoorlie Pipeline, by means of a comprehensive broad range of activities, experiences and services at places along the route. The pipeline traverses eight wheatbelt shires.

The essence of a community is the ‘sense of place’ associated with the cultural environment: the tangibles of a recognisable building or place, and the intangibles of the memories and feelings evoked by the place. A place is often the physical representation of the community. The dilapidated hall informs just as surely as a well-maintained hall, or the site of a hall that used to be. Museums of local history utilise a considerable number of former railway stations, road-board offices, banks and hospitals, and craft shops abound. History is everywhere but not necessarily telling the story it should or could.
Agriculture WA (government department) has a number of rural initiatives underway, including the Community Builders. Representatives from up to ten adjoining towns and districts gather regularly to discuss issues and initiate projects in their communities. The exchange of ideas and introduction into other communities is an exciting basis for sharing experiences and expertise and recognising opportunities. It serves to broaden parochial horizons and participants often begin to see their town in a different perspective.

A number of shires experiencing population decline instigated programs to regenerate their towns. In Bruce Rock several years ago they advertised free land for anyone settling in the town. They were overwhelmed by the response, but most of the people were long term 'welfare' recipients, and seemingly did not make a positive contribution to the community, although it is quite a thriving town. More recently, Wyalkatchem successfully gained several business enterprises in the town when they advertised free house and land for young families settling and establishing businesses.

One of the most memorable communities in the wheatbelt is Pingaring. It is a siding settlement with a population of less than five people. It has a hall, general store and CWA (Country Women's Association), a recently closed school on the outskirts of the townsite, a wheatbin, seasonal railway and a golf club. The town is split between two local government authorities. If the residents do not fight for their community they do not survive. They lost the school battle. Pingaring has a history in living memory of the railway line going through in 1931, and a settlement establishing around the siding. The community is like a family, but that will not sustain it for the future.

The spirit of a rural community is further reflected in the Doodenanning community. When they recently celebrated 100 years since first settlement in that area, over 200 people returned to the community hall (1918) in Doodenanning. One 80 year-old man hadn't been in the district since he was a child in 1929 and his children and grandchildren had not previously visited the place where their pioneer descendants settled, even though it is only two hours from Perth. He was an example of many of the people mingling on the day, attentively reading name tags so that they might recall an old school friend or family acquaintance. The feeling was of one big family, which indeed a community is. On the day, a history of the Doodenanning area was launched. The book was a culmination of countless hours of research, and very importantly, of talking to people and recording their memories. It is their stories that add to the total of what makes a place memorable. The Doodi Hall, as it is affectionately known, continues to be the focus of the Doodenanning community, and is used constantly by the community as the golf club, tennis club, fire fighters' headquarters and for any social event that takes place. It is not in a town, it is a 30-minute drive over gravel roads to the nearest town, but the community thrives and values the hall that represents them and their heritage, of which they are very proud. It is seen as an important part of their future.
...the future

Community alone will not provide economic sustainability; however, survival of the rural towns in the wheatbelt is possible. Realisation and promotion of cultural heritage assets, supported by quality and appropriate regional service-facilities, as well as the continued development of agriculture and a unique and threatened farming way of life, begins to address the survival of towns and the long term sustainability of the wheatbelt.

The Heritage Council of Western Australia provides regional heritage advisory services to a number of regions in Western Australia, including the wheatbelt. The wheatbelt service is fully funded by the Heritage Council and provides 32 hours per month on contract to the region, including travel time. The service provides local governments, community organisations and individuals with support and advice to identify, understand, conserve, use, develop, interpret and promote their heritage. Unfortunately, from January 2000, the lack of funding resources has determined that the regional advisory hours are reduced to 16 per month for the entire wheatbelt region.