The Australian World Heritage Advisory Committee

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As a State Party to the World Heritage Convention, Australia has a range of obligations for the conservation and management of its nineteen World Heritage properties. Among other requirements, the Operational Guidelines of the Convention indicate that World Heritage places should be part of life in the community, that natural and cultural heritage values should be presented as well as conserved and that applied research should be fostered through resource allocation and by establishing ‘centres of excellence’.

In Australia the requirements of the Convention are addressed through the Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999 (EPBC Act), as well as by the ‘Australian Intergovernmental Agreement on World Heritage’. The EPBC Act sets out protective and regulatory processes and prescriptive regulations for heritage impact assessment and the content of management plans. The Intergovernmental Agreement provides high-level principles and specifies the respective roles of Commonwealth, State and Territorial governments.

The Australian World Heritage Advisory Committee (AWHAC), established under the Intergovernmental Agreement, provides advice on matters relating to the conservation and management of World Heritage properties and Australia’s obligations under the Convention. AWHAC comprises representatives from each Australian World Heritage property. During its early stages AWHAC met ‘in person’ on Country, but budgetary limitations over recent years have limited AWHAC interaction to teleconferences, internet-based information sharing and e-mail contact.

In addition to the property-specific representation, AWHAC includes two Indigenous members nominated by the Australian World Heritage Indigenous Network (AWHIN), also established under the Intergovernmental Agreement. AWHIN is a network of Traditional Owner representatives that provides an Indigenous perspective on management of Country and an important forum for regular communication and sharing of knowledge, culture, skills and experiences. While the intention is that AWHIN should meet face-to-face on Country, at present, such meetings are only possible when they coincide with other funded gatherings such as the National Indigenous Land and Sea Management Conference. AWHAC supports the involvement of Indigenous stakeholders, particularly Traditional Owners, in World Heritage property management and has advised the Commonwealth Minister that obligations to seek approval from or engage with Indigenous people arise not only for World Heritage properties that are inscribed for Indigenous cultural values, but for all Australian World Heritage properties with Indigenous stakeholders.

AWHAC is currently developing a ‘Framework for Best Practice Management of Australian World Heritage Properties’ comprising a set of principles and standards that reflect how the management of World Heritage properties should comply with both the Convention and the EPBC Act. The Framework incorporates results from years of AWHAC deliberations and experience, as well as relevant principles from the Cairns Communiqué, which arose from the
‘Keeping the Outstanding Exceptional’ symposium organised by the Australian Committee of IUCN to mark the 40th year of the Convention in 2012. In the absence of a Ministerial Council with responsibility for the environment, the framework will be submitted to the Commonwealth Minister, but it is intended to assist site managers and individual property advisory committees, both in terms of compliance and priority setting, but particularly in their relationships with government regarding resourcing and particular programs.

Other recent AWHAC initiatives include contributions to the developing Australian Heritage Strategy, and representations to the Commonwealth regarding the National Environment Resource Program. The latter submission incorporates a research paper that outlines obligations and identifies general research needs for Australian World Heritage properties.

There are many opportunities for AWHAC to continue to address current and emerging issues for Australian World Heritage. For example, by contrast with many of our World Heritage properties places listed for natural Outstanding Universal Value, the eleven Australian Convict Sites lack the benefits brought by an executive officer in a coordinating role. Greater resources are needed for applied research aimed at the conservation of World Heritage values and, for a long time, Australia’s ‘Tentative List’ of places yet to be nominated for consideration by the World Heritage Committee has languished, largely unpopulated.

AWHAC was established in order to assist the Commonwealth in meeting its obligations under the Convention, particularly the connections between place and people. Being a community, place-based committee, AWHAC adds value by providing independent advice and highlighting cross-cutting issues and opportunities. At a time when there are major pressures on some Australian World Heritage properties and declining resources, AWHAC is one area in which Australia continues to demonstrate best-practice innovation.