Introduction

The heritage concept has struck fertile ground in the imaginations of Australians. Its potential to play important roles in attaching cultural meanings to the continent and in the maturation of society’s environmental behaviour are considered in this paper.

Questions about the cultural construction of heritage and the purposes it serves are mostly asked about the built environment in Australia: in the interests of broadening discussion, nature is covered as well here. It is not common, moreover, to relate heritage to wider environmental concerns. The attempt is made in the paper and there is a possibly unusual integration of environmental and heritage literature. The use of the terms ‘nonhuman world’ and ‘human world’ are used from here on as alternatives to ‘nature’ and ‘culture’, which are expressive of a dichotomy which may be part of the problem that Australians (and other societies) are experiencing in coming to terms with their environment. Almost passing reference is made to historical roots of the division between nature and culture, but it is critical historical views of aspects of the development of Australian thought and perceptions that are used to contend that heritage most often underpins the status quo rather than challenging society’s norms. This is no new argument, but is more often posed in respect of cultural heritage alone and with more emphasis on social rather than environmental reform.

Australia as commodity

Nor could it be imagined that this Wilderness should turn a mart for Merchants in so short a space, Holland, France, Spain, and Portugal coming hither for trade. So spoke the North American colonial historian Edward Johnson in 1653, quoted by Cronon to characterise the revolution that British occupation represented for the relationship between humans and the environment of New England. Australia surely ran parallel when its hunter gatherers were disposessed and the continent was made available for the expansion of the British economy. These events represented a fundamental shift in the relationships between humanity and the nonhuman world, just as recorded for New England: a subsistence economy was replaced by a system for the accumulation of wealth through market place dealings, and by demands not only from within the country but from European markets. Thus entered Australia the kind of ‘new human perception’, described by Cronon, of how the resources of a continent’s ecosystems could be turned into commodities to serve an economy with few limitations on growth.

The nonhuman world became commodity, at least potentially, and so did the heritage of Australia, interpreted in the broadest sense as the total environment claimed by the new inhabitants. This revolution in perception figured in the cultural construction of the environment at the very birth of the nation.

An alternative view

Any cultural dimensions of the environment for the Kooris and other Aboriginal inhabitants were not understood, denied, or simply swamped by the new world-view. Huge ironies with implications for views of the heritage of Australia, at least with hindsight, also arose. For example, the perception of landscape as repository of cultural history has only recently begun to enter contemporary thinking in this country through cultural landscape conservation ideas, but the evidence mounts that the continent was appreciated as cultural landscape long before recorded history in a most extraordinary fashion. Lipe could find no better example of the symbolic use of the environment to transmit culture than the ‘extreme case’ of the Aboriginal Australians, citing Eliade’s judgement that the entire landscape ‘is charged with awe: every rock, spring, and water hole represents a concrete trace of a sacred drama carried out in the mythical times’. Even these words may be inadequate, as the sacred landscape is more than highly significant and a primary determinant of identity and culture.

Perhaps here is an instance in which ‘nature’ and ‘culture’ are truly one. Certainly, amongst Ngarinman and Ngaliwurrur people (in the Northern Territory) there is the clear identification of a natural role for humans in fulfilling certain responsibilities in the cosmos alongside many different categories of moral agents, including animals, the sun, moon, and rain; moreover, humanity is not the centre of the cosmos, but one amongst various ‘sets of actors’ enjoying ‘autonomous ontological status’.

These characteristics of Aboriginal culture suggest questions about whether contemporary Australia at large, in its search for identity, a sense of belonging, and a basis for satisfactory and rewarding environmental behaviour can share in traditional, indigenous cultural constructions of the environment. Bernard
Smith argued for a kind of meeting between black and white cultures in Australia that he termed a convergence (after poet Les Murray), but also identified the enormous gulf that continues to prevent possibilities of a genuine sharing. Whilst for its part, Aboriginal Australia is ‘trying to come home’ (as Georgina Williams of the Adelaide region Kaurna people said) and rediscover its roots, the other components of society, dependent ethically on values predominantly derived from cultures evolved in different environments, still face the unresolved guilt of the dispossession and murder that accompanied the very foundation of the nation: the ethical roots of culture for most Australians remain fundamentally flawed, and it is facile to talk of environmental perceptions in common with Aboriginal people unless atonement is achieved.

Further, the indigenous culture has been used and appropriated by the state and by the tourist industry for ends ignorant of the historical factors which created or maintain the present conditions of Aboriginal people, whether to legitimise the ‘triumph of the present’ or the ‘future trajectory of the nation’. Conveniently portrayed as but the first wave of immigrants to the continent, they provide for the newcomer society the authenticity of a 40,000 year or more antiquity that may help free it from a historical dependency on Britain, and are a stepping stone in the saga of progress toward a modern industrialised nation. Thus, major contradictions arise as Aboriginal people are co-opted as heritage for Australians at large.

Resourcism
Another, older revolution should also be examined in the Australian context for its structuring of the meanings attached to the environment. The view of nature established by science not only came to this continent as cultural baggage, but is sustained by Australia’s participation in the world community of science and technology. Despite new insights this century from both quantum physics and biology, involving respectively ideas about the impossibility of observing (natural) systems without accounting for the active involvement of the observer and the interconnectedness of all components of the biosphere, the mechanistic, value-less model of nature inherited from Bacon and Descartes stands. Yet, the scientific view of the world is no less a social construct than any other. According to the terms of science’s construct, nature is devoid of intrinsic meaning.

Ethically, the consequences of dealing with an instrumentalized nature include the absence of ‘moral limits imposed upon science and technology’, and an open hand with moulding its ‘plastic stuff’. This stance fits comfortably with ‘resourcism’ – utility to humans – which sees the nonhuman world as nothing but ‘matter in search of a use’, and is in stark contrast, for example, with the Ngarrimans’ and Ngaliwurrus’ vision of a cosmos people by responsible moral agents of independent existence, whether human or nonhuman. Such comparisons prompt worrying questions – if it is accepted that individuals and societies grow according to ideals and visions in their deeper lives – about how and where Australia is to find the symbols and concepts upon which to base its identity in the continent and its relationships with the environment.

Re-investing the nonhuman world with value
Change in the ways the nonhuman world has been perceived in Australia has occurred, however, and can be illustrated by shifting perceptions of landscape. As a matter of conservation interest, landscape was regarded largely in Australia as scenery, reflected, for instance, in earlier official nomenclature for land conservation bodies, such as Tasmania’s Scenery Preservation Board. Shifts in consciousness have occurred as the constantly enlarging body of information on ecosystems in Australia reaches the public. Elsewhere, it has been suggested that such knowledge is changing perception itself. Terrie argued that the history of society’s stewardship of the Adirondack Forest Preserve (in New York State) demonstrated a shift in the basis for environmental aesthetic judgements from nature (or landscape) as scenic beauty to nature as complex and intricate ecosystem. The romantically-linked aesthetic that held sway in the Western world from the eighteenth century is being overtaken by a ‘wilderness aesthetic’. Using the alternative titles of ‘evolutionary-ecological’ or ‘land aesthetic’ (after Aldo Leopold), Callicott further explained: a swamp, for example, which may hold little attraction from the landscape aesthetic standpoint, can be ‘a thing of rare and precious beauty’ if people see it via perception ‘informed by geology, hydrology, organic evolution, and ecological biology’.

This sort of perception/appreciation can be discerned in sectors of Australia’s conservation movement, fired by the realisation that wildlands are a scarce resource worldwide and that the late industrial development of this continent provides a unique opportunity to retain examples of less substantially modified ecosystems than can generally be found elsewhere. Advocacy for wilderness preservation in Australia has been couched in terms of value to society often enough, but an argument over the essential motivation of the wilderness movement put by Hay implies not only a perception informed by ecology, but insists upon an ecocentric view which locates all components of the biosphere in the moral community and denies humanity’s ‘moral pre-eminence among the species’. This conclusion opposed claims of descent from nineteenth century romantics, particularly from those threads of romanticism which looked to a...
golden age of the past, to the pastoral idyll, and found an ally in conservative politics. Indeed, Hay pronounced the wilderness protection movement as an historical discontinuity, as well as showing little interest in history; a correct statement of a position which is leading to conflict in Australia and further blows to Aboriginal communities. An a-historical ecocentric stance can overlook the continuous occupation of the continent for all those 40,000 (or perhaps even a lot more) years and define an area as wilderness that is someone’s home.

Arguably, nevertheless, the most significant achievement of environmentalists in Australia has been the defence of enclaves of the nonhuman world, leading to subsequent protection by government. On the other hand, a skewed and perhaps dangerous vision of the Australian environment is being promoted, distracting attention from issues of how society relates to the continent as a whole. Some, like poet Les Murray, have seen national parks as but ‘useful ... holding operations in the modern age’. Perhaps their most enduring values in the development of the country’s relationship with nonhuman Australia will prove to be their representation of the ethic of leaving things alone, of withholding some areas from development, and the attainment of a glimpse of freedom from resourcism. As others have pointed out, however, there can be contradictions arising from aims to develop such enclaves for tourism.

The built world

If the environmental movement has made certain gains in favour of the nonhuman world but neglected the total environment, what of heritage conservationists and the built world?

In some ways, a strikingly similar pattern has emerged. A parallel withholding of some development rights has been achieved, mostly for buildings to which State heritage legislation has been applied. A focus on the special building (or, sometimes, precinct) is evident, and heritage conservation has not faced issues of the meaning of the past in guiding and development of the entire urban environment, much less relating its theory to wider environmental concerns or to ‘powerful and integrating’ notions like the ‘conserver society’. There are parallels with the way the nonhuman world has been perceived. Buildings are commodities rather than valued for their contribution to local character or the facilitation of social exchanges. Aspects of resourcism can be detected, too, as a way of seeing heritage. Evernden’s characterisation of landscape beauty ‘as simply another resource’ for utilisation by humans is relevant: ‘rather than an experience or a way of perceiving the world, aesthetics becomes a collector’s search for special things’. The sort of reification that turns beauty into objects can make the heritage building a fashionable end in itself, bereft of historical and social meanings and concealing a possible broader contribution to the city as humane living and work environment.

If one accepts Evernden’s analysis and its application to heritage, one can also be apprehensive, mindful of how the term ‘the visual resource’ has been applied to landscape, at the meanings that might be attached to the terms ‘cultural heritage resources’ and Cultural Resources Management (CRM). As opposed to the nonhuman world, however, the built environment is constructed by humans precisely for human use. Nevertheless, whereas the defence of the nonhuman world has been constructed on a premise of intrinsic value, the case for heritage, too, needs to be firmly located in a theory of value, presumably personal and social.

In Australia there has been no dearth of criticism of aspects of heritage conservation practices and ideas on social grounds. Reference to a small sample only points to problems associated with the institutionalisation of heritage, including professionalisation versus public involvement, and the co-option in Victoria of conservation bodies into statutory processes; the reduction of the heritage concept to aesthetics, architecture, and style; and the focus on objects at the cost of an ‘inspirational view of history’ which sees the stuff of heritage as the persistence of ideals, morals, and spiritual values. There have also been warnings about processes like that of ‘nationing history’ in constructing a particular present and future, and about aspects of the use of heritage by the tourist industry, which tends ‘to offer the great majority of Australians an imaginative diversion from their present conditions of existence rather than affording a familiarity with the ... histories from which those conditions effectively flow’. Blake is right in suggesting that fundamental questions about how significance inheres in a place and the nature of cultural significance are too infrequently asked in Australia.

Beyond, but embroiled in these questions lies the problem that there is no developed philosophy of value with respect to the built environment, certainly none to be compared with the value-oriented strands of environmental philosophy which have marshalled support for an ecocentric stance with respect to the nonhuman world. McConville, however, points in fruitful directions. To relate heritage to both history and the present, an analysis is needed which proposes an urban theory, encompassing power in the city, and ‘rival meanings’ of past and present to that of the developer and the planner. Such an analysis could feed into a heritage philosophy, but would inevitably conflict with established power bases and question the control of the built environment as a whole.
The built world, heritage, and environmental awareness

A basis for looking to cultural heritage (and history) to foster environmental awareness is the essentially simple realisation that the human-modified environment is the record of society’s land interactions and impact. Inhabited country becomes over time the expression of an environmental ‘stance’, whilst the land both forms and becomes part of cultural identity.

Commentators on valuing the past have stressed its importance more often in socio-cultural terms than for its implications for environmental concern. Emphasis has been laid on connections between history and a sense of individual and collective identity, for example. Even when the focus has been on the past as guide for future environments, it tends to be about humane living conditions rather than the environment as a whole. In Australia, Young’s work has been an exception, whilst only a handful of others have remarked upon the need to incorporate heritage conservation into wider environmental care.

That relating history to the environment is not all that common seems surprising. Connections between this sort of enterprise and components of environmental perception have been expressed by Nash, probably the most widely-known author in the field of environmental history:

I would, rather, attempt a history of attitude and action toward the land. This would involve a description of environmental change, but my interest in it would be as evidence of man’s values, ideals, ambitions, and fears.

Australia has not shown a comparable depth of enthusiasm for environmental history, although a small number of contributions of other kinds have provided key arguments for affirming links amongst cultural heritage, history, and environmental awareness.

Bernard Smith perhaps pioneered such work when he explained how Sali Herman’s paintings first revealed to the residents of Sydney their own surroundings. Hitherto, Australian cities had not been presented in artistic terms as personal environments. Smith judged that Australians were still far from developing historical awareness as ‘a kind of perception, an ability to see the past as one of the qualities of presently existing things’, however. To appreciate ‘that all environments whether urban, suburban, or rural are in some measure historic’ encourages people to explore their surroundings as ‘an aspect of self-knowledge’. The implication is that the historical perceptual ‘mode’ leads to a different kind of environmental perception (so that we see into ‘the character of things’, as Smith said, citing Herman). A fundamental shift is involved: things formerly seen as ‘merely old’ became ‘heritage’, for instance.

In effect extending Smith’s ideas, Powell offered insights into how a sense of history can influence attitudes to the environment: the achievement of both an Australian cultural identity and a better relationship with the land depended on learning to interpret the environment together with human impacts. Study of the history of society’s environmental relationships, both good and bad, would allow Australians not only to find themselves, but to critically examine how they had cared for the continent, thus placing them in a position where they could see the need to amend their environmental behaviour. The meaning of landscape and its links with national identity were also pertinent. To investigate responses to environment is to approach human experience of landscape in terms of personal and social meanings. Further, the type of landscape studies needed to assist Australians to see more in their surroundings and ‘to take spiritual possession of them thereby’ are not detached academic enquiries but those based on a ‘research/educative’ process involving the ‘democratisation’ of knowledge.

The cultural landscape notion also lends itself particularly well to arguments for the relevance of cultural heritage to environmental perception. The cultural landscape can be used to draw attention to the tangible relics of history in the wider surroundings and to focus on the effects of entire patterns of settlement and occupation, thus impinging on perceptions of the total environment and serving as ‘a basis for environmental bonding and identification’. It may be that best use of the conservation concept can be made by drawing attention to historical values in all landscapes. However, as with any other heritage item, there is a danger that the cultural landscape may be just another object singled out for special attention. Warnings have already surfaced in Australia of the need for history and heritage to serve democratic access to cultural values, but there can be no such expectation without the fostering of history’s ‘rival meanings’.

Conclusions

If perceptions of cultural dimensions of the Australian environment are to be marshalled as an effective, unifying influence for improved care of the environment as a whole, the concept of heritage needs to be divorced from its exclusive alliance with the precious and related to ordinary localities, including those where people live and work. This process cannot begin without critical examination of heritage and history in the context of the interests they have been employed to further and the entrenched attitudes they sometimes underwrite.
Integrating concepts are needed, especially of the sort to which heritage itself can be related to foster mature attitudes of environmental concern that are not rigidly compartmentalised into categories of ‘cultural’ and ‘natural’. Most likely, such concepts will have to be of a type dictating that some very hard decisions will have to be made. The ‘conserver society’ concept is a case in point, as is another which can be seen to be partly related in its demands, namely, Edward Relp’s ‘environmental humility’, based on respect for beliefs, things and places ‘as they are now, a willingness in other words to leave them alone’. In addition, those espousing the cause of heritage will need to be very clear about the basis of their claims; it is difficult to see how they can establish a strong position without a well-developed philosophy of value.

Australians are constructing an identity in a new, strange land and, given the environmental problems that this century has produced, are faced with the task of developing cultural identity simultaneously with a new environmental ethic. Commenting on the growth of cultural landscape interests in the United States, Melnick wrote that the heritage conservation movement there was shifting its focus ‘from a single issue concern to a multi-dimensional expression of caring for the world around us’; the change represented a convergence of interests, indicative of ‘new understandings concerning the ways in which both natural and cultural resources are vital to our biological and human existence’. At a modest scale, winds of change are also evident in Australia, as evidenced by the development of thought expressing the realisation that ‘... society, nature, and the human-adapted environment are all closely and dynamically related’, but it is doubtful whether Australians know what that insight means in this continent yet.

The community needs a well integrated perception of the total environment and clear ideas of how it is located within it. The perceptual mode held by traditional Aboriginal culture may have potential to teach Australians how to reconcile themselves with the land in spirit, but that avenue has been generally closed by the absence of cultural reconciliation.

Endnotes
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1 I am indebted to Warwick Fox for pointing out how these terms might help to overcome the deficiency arising from normal usage of the word ‘nature’, which implies that humanity is ‘somehow outside the natural order’ (as Fox says in his doctoral thesis). Further discussion of the problem is included in the volume: W. Fox, Toward a Transpersonal Ecology: Developing New Foundations for Environmentalism, Shambhala, Boston, 1990.


3 Cronon, p. 167.


8 Smith, pp. 9-16.


11 Bennett, p. 15.

12 Morris, Domesticating Resistance, p. 203.

13 Bennett, Out of Which Past?, p. 15.


17 McLaughlin, Environmental Ethics, p. 294.


24. Quoted in Smith, The Sphere of Truganini, p. 50.


29. G. Davison, Faulty Spires: The Church and Historic Conservation, Uniting Church Historical Society, Victoria, Melbourne, 1987, p. 3.


31. Blake, Environmental Politics in Australia and New Zealand, p. 73.


33. McConville, Melbourne Historical Journal, p. 73.


42. Young, p. 12.

43. McConville, Melbourne Historical Journal, p. 73.

