THE ICOMOS APPROACH TO THE
ARCHAEOLOGICAL RESOURCE.

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The ICOMOS approach to the Australian prehistoric archaeological resource may in essence be
described simply as the application of the principles embodied in the Burra Charter to the
management of that resource. Having said that, we do need to consider what the archaeological
resource is, and how it might differ from other kinds of resource to which the Burra Charter applies.

I shall also look at some of the problems peculiar to the prehistoric archaeological resource in
Australia, and especially Western Australia. Many of these problems are to do with peoples’
perceptions, and it is clear that public education has an important role to play here, which might
also be seen as providing a role for ICOMOS.

Archaeology is, literally, the study of old things. To put it another way, it is the study of human
societies through a study of their material remains. Thus, archaeologists may study a whole gamut
of societies, in space and time, not necessarily ones which have vanished from the earth, and not
necessarily the non-literate nor the supposedly exotic. It is important to understand that
archaeologists are not interested in things, in material remains, artefacts, objects, ruins, buildings, as
an end in themselves; as archaeologists we are not interested in aesthetics, nor deep spiritual values,
nor sentimental attachments, although we might be interested in those things as members of society,
as simple human beings, or as members of broader groups such as ICOMOS. As archaeologists, we
are interested in the things we study because of the information which they convey to us about the
people who made or used or discarded them. As archaeologists, we may work with other
professionals or interested parties on conservation or management projects of various kinds, and we
need to understand the other values that, say, architects, may attach to things; as archaeologists,
however, our brief is to assess the significance of the resource as archaeologists, that is, in terms of
the information it contains for our understanding of the human society which produced it.

Prehistoric archaeology is the archaeological study of societies without written records. Obviously
the time frame for this depends on where you are. In the Middle East, prehistory ceased some 5000
years ago; in western Europe, with the coming of the Romans; in Australia, with the European
invasion about 200 years ago. Clearly, archaeological research has a very important role in
elucidating, in a framework of western European scholarship and science, the history of such
societies.

I say, advisedly, ‘within a western framework’, because the descendants of the people who
produced that resource may have a different viewpoint. Aboriginal people in Australia do not
necessarily need the services of archaeologists to instruct them about their own past; they have their
own, very viable, traditions. They do however often see the worth of what we do insofar as we
provide a useful perspective to the general public on the antiquity of the Aboriginal occupation of
Australia in a framework they may comprehend. While there has been, and continues to be,
disagreement between some archaeologists and some Aboriginal people about the activities of
archaeologists, I think it is not overly optimistic to observe that communication between these
groups has improved enormously over the last few years, and genuine understanding and
collaboration is becoming much more common.
The archaeological resource has one particular aspect which sets it apart from most natural resources: it is non-renewable. It is also often, particularly the prehistoric aspect, extremely vulnerable. Prehistoric sites are usually landscape features of some kind, rather than obvious large structures. They may often be at risk from natural processes, farming activity, and development activities of all kinds, especially ones like mining, which drastically affect the landscape. We therefore need to manage the resource, and to that end we have statutory bodies employing professional archaeologists, and other professional archaeologists who work as consultants. The archaeologist’s primary task, in my view, is to carry out research into the past of human societies. Not all archaeologists are, however, in a position to carry out pure research, and many do find a satisfying career in some aspect of the management side of things. However, to carry out their work properly, they do need to be appropriately conversant with current research, substantively, methodologically and theoretically.

To manage the archaeological resource properly is to understand its significance to archaeological research. Archaeologically, it has no other use. The role of the archaeologist in management therefore is to be able to assess archaeological sites in terms of their potential to contribute to archaeological research. It is generally agreed that such an assessment should be couched in terms of the potential of a given site to answer timely and relevant research questions, and/or represent in a statistical sense some particular aspect of the overall resource.

One of the complications we deal with in Australia is that archaeological sites may have a different kind of significance to Aboriginal people. This is something archaeologists should be aware of, and which, as managers, they need to take into account. Ideally, however, Aboriginal people should be in a position to assess for themselves which sites are significant to them, and how management should proceed to protect such significance.

In Western Australia, in particular, there is a definite confusion in the public mind (not helped by an equal confusion in the minds of many politicians) between archaeological sites and sites of Aboriginal significance. In reality, some archaeological sites have no immediate, apparent or known significance to Aboriginal people; some sites of great significance to Aboriginal people (‘sacred sites’) have no archaeological component whatsoever; they may be just natural features in the landscape for instance, and some sites are of differing, or equal (but different) significance to Aboriginal people and archaeologists. It seems to me important, in the decision-making process, to keep these different kinds of significance separate in the assessment stages, but that all kinds of significance should be taken into account in the framing of final recommendations.

Obviously some aspects of the Burra Charter do not apply to the prehistoric archaeological resource, as an archaeological resource. The general principles entailed in the Burra Charter are however clearly relevant. In general, we are dealing with places of scientific significance. The fabric of an archaeological site may be considered to be its constituent parts, but of particular significance to research is a site with stratified deposits, which enable the archaeologist to excavate information from a controlled and datable situation. The scientific significance of a site may reside in such deposits remaining undisturbed, so it is imperative that the fabric should be maintained in its existing state.

The fabric of an archaeological site may be disturbed by the processes mentioned above; but it is also disturbed by the activities which give it meaning, which is to say, controlled scientific excavation. Excavation is destruction, as Sir Mortimer Wheeler pointed out many years ago. It is never therefore undertaken lightly, and is in most States controlled by a statutory authority, with some sort of a permit system. It should almost go without saying that excavation should only be
undertaken by fully trained and experienced personnel, or under the direct supervision of such fully
tained and experienced personnel. Excavation should also only be undertaken under one of two
circumstances.

Firstly, excavation should be carried out to answer clearly defined research questions, developed
within a professional and scholarly research design, which takes cognisance of current research
issues, theories and methodologies. All possible non-destructive research should be carried out first
(in accordance with Burra Charter principles). The questions addressed by excavation should not
be answerable by other methods or sources of information. The site should be chosen on the basis
that only by excavation of that site may the questions be addressed. Archaeologists should never,
for research purposes, excavate an entire site; we do not know the research questions of tomorrow,
we do not know the research techniques, or questions, of tomorrow.

Secondly, excavation may be carried out to mitigate the impact of development or other threat.
This is what is meant by ‘salvage excavation’, never a happy idea. Excavation for mitigation
purposes should really be seen as a last resort. If a site is threatened in some way, the first choice
should be to avert the threat. The second choice is to minimise the threat as far as possible; the last
choice is salvage. Quite often, archaeological managers and/or consultants are able to make
recommendations which are of the nature of acceptable compromises to all parties. Quite often it is
sites of no great significance which are threatened, and for which quite simple mitigative measures
may be perfectly acceptable, for instance, detailed recording of surface stone artefact scatters. It is
actually only very rarely indeed that a site of major archaeological significance presents an
insurmountable object to development. One such example in Australia was the Franklin River
caves in Tasmania.

An important distinction between sites of archaeological significance and sites of Aboriginal
significance is that, in the latter case, mitigation may simply not be possible. There is no way that
one can ‘salvage’ a site of importance to Aboriginal people. It is important therefore that while the
assessment procedures for sites of archaeological significance, and sites of Aboriginal significance
may, and probably should, be carried out independently, final recommendations must be framed in
the context of all such considerations.

Current apparent confrontations over Aboriginal sites issues in Western Australia are based largely,
in my view, on inappropriate procedures. It is probably a waste of time to apportion blame, but it is
my observation that some companies have simply disregarded appropriate advice. In general,
archaeological sites should not be a problem, if that issue is addressed as early as possible in the
planning process. This applies also to sites of significance to Aboriginal people, with the proviso
that solutions may not be found as easily as with respect to archaeological sites, where the real issue
is related to questions of research, not deep spiritual significance.

One might conclude with the observation that, if intelligently interpreted, the Burra Charter
provides a good framework for archaeological management procedures. It might also be noted
however that there is now also an international charter for archaeological management, produced by
the International Committee of Archaeological Heritage Management, which is itself an
international ICOMOS committee.