THE ICOMOS APPROACH TO 
THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL RESOURCE.

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1. The concept embraced by Australia ICOMOS

It is undoubtedly true that any place which has cultural significance will at some stage or other require its manager to make decisions concerning its management. Through the Burra Charter and the guidelines which support it, Australia ICOMOS has attempted to establish principles, processes and guidelines for practice which will assist the manager in making those decisions.

The emphasis of ICOMOS is on the aspects of the place relating to cultural significance. In the context of underwater heritage it is up to the manager to decide to what extent other aspects of management, such as recreation access, have a heritage component which will be guided by the ICOMOS principles.

In my view the ICOMOS principles embodied in the Burra Charter are applicable to all places of cultural significance, including underwater heritage places. It is the detail of practice contained within the Charter that is a matter of recurrent debate. While the drafters of the Burra Charter in the late 1970s and early 1980s attempted to canvas the approaches of all disciplines involved in conservation, it was inevitable that the Charter would be flavoured by the perspectives of the dominant discipline in conservation at that date, architecture.

Therefore the Charter needs interpretation for its process to be applied to other disciplines and contexts, and for appropriate practices to be developed for particular types of places. The Burra Charter should be seen as what it now is, an historical document, and not as a sacrosanct and infallible gospel. The discussion about how to interpret Burra for specialised needs should be seen as a healthy and stimulating exercise, and not an act of iconoclasm.

2. The ICOMOS Process

The Burra Charter has several levels of message. There is an underlying process for conservation planning (which I call the ICOMOS process) which is touched on in the Charter, but is primarily elaborated in the subsequent Guidelines to the Charter. There is also a set of basic principles underpinning the philosophical approach to conservation, and a series of specific statements about the practice of conservation. As pointed out above, it is in the area of practice that the Charter is most influenced by its architectural roots, and which is most problematic for those working in divergent conservation fields.

I suggest that the underlying ICOMOS process of conservation planning is universally applicable. The process in summary is as follows:

1. IDENTIFY sufficient information to be able to analyse the various attributes of the place
2. ASSESS all aspects of the place’s cultural significance
3. Detail that assessment in a STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE
4. COLLECT all information relevant to the future management of the place (including the statement of significance)
5. ASSESS the management constraints and opportunities
6. Formulate a POLICY statement which attempts to achieve the retention of cultural significance (step 3), while satisfying the constraints and fulfilling the opportunities which face management (step 5).

7. Develop an IMPLEMENTATION PLAN which says how the policy will be implemented.

This process is as valid for underwater cultural heritage as it is for land sites.

3. Archaeology and Burra

As I have said, the Burra Charter was largely influenced by the 1970s practices of the architectural fraternity, and archaeologists have pointed to one particular article in the Burra Charter as posing problems for them. It is worth noting that the problem is not in the over-riding ICOMOS process, but in the detail of its elaboration in the Burra Charter. The article which has caused difficulty is Article 24, which says:

Study of a place by any intervention in the fabric or by archaeological excavation should be undertaken where necessary to provide data essential for decisions on the conservation of the place and/or to secure evidence about to be lost or made inaccessible through necessary conservation or other unavoidable action. Investigation of a place for any other reason which requires physical disturbance and which adds substantially to a scientific body of knowledge may be permitted, provided that it is consistent with the conservation policy for the place.

The problem seen by archaeologists is that Article 24:
- restricts excavation to salvage; or to
- action taken to establish decisions about conservation action; or to.
- adherence to an already established Conservation Policy.

As Sharon Sullivan has pointed out (Sullivan, 1983), there is a basic problem with the concept behind article 24 when it comes to archaeology, in that for archaeological sites the primary or only significance might rest in the research value of the site, which may only be demonstrated by excavation which partially or in extreme cases totally destroys the fabric of the place. It may not be possible to write a conservation policy before that excavation is carried out, because the reality of the archeological potential cannot be guaranteed. The degree of intervention is far beyond that which would be acceptable at the parallel stage in the investigation of a building.

Similarly, even if a conservation policy were written for an archaeological site, if research value (scientific significance) were the sole value of the site, the policy would include the subsequent destruction of at least part of the fabric to allow the research potential to be realised. This concept, which is not usually a part of building conservation, is not explicitly envisaged in the Burra Charter. It is worth noting, however, that the archaeological approach is not inconsistent with, ICOMOS process generally.

While these problems have been perceived in the past, I believe that archaeology itself has developed over the last decade to the point where it is more able (and willing) to look at the concept behind Article 24 rather than concentrate on the words as written. When this is done, most archaeologists would now agree that the process of establishing a policy which looks at all values of a site is essential before a decision is made to excavate. There is no basic contradiction in having a conservation policy which allows for excavation and consequent destruction of fabric of a place if the policy establishes that the only or overwhelming value of the place is its research potential. It is just that the drafters of The Burra Charter hadn’t thought through that issue and hence had not dealt with it. Most archaeologists would now agree that archaeological sites may have a range of other values which would limit or preclude excavation when formulating a conservation policy for the place.
4. Balancing archaeological and other values

The challenge for archaeologists is to balance the archaeological values of sites with other aspects of their significance. Much has been written about the issue of assessing the archaeological potential of sites, and the way in which research value is defined (Australian examples include Bickford and Sullivan, Pearson, and Bowdler, all in Sullivan and Bowdler, 1984). However, relatively little has been written about how to weigh the archaeological value with other aspects of significance when developing the statement of significance and conservation policy for a place, other than in the context of the management of places of archaeological value which are of special significance to Aboriginal people.

The equation might be quite complex for some places in the historical environment, including underwater heritage sites. Firstly there is the issue of deciding if the archaeological values of the place are such that other values, such as the continued survival of buildings, works or landscape features of historical, social or aesthetic value, should be compromised in any way by archaeological investigation. It is often the case that archaeology has to be limited or precluded because of the overriding consideration of the conservation of these other values. If archaeological work can proceed without compromising the long-term value of other elements of the place’s cultural value, a decision has to be made about how much of the archaeological deposits should be made available for excavation, in what time frame, and how much reserved as a reference site for some future date.

In making these assessment and policy decisions it is necessary to involve a range of relevant expertise. Poor conservation (or research) policies are often made such by the presumptions of the author to be able to deal with all the fields necessary for a comprehensive assessment and analysis of issues alone. It is rarely the case that any one discipline can adequately cover all aspects of even relatively simple sites.

5. Conclusion

I believe that the ICOMOS concepts and principles (as expressed in part in the Burra Charter) are applicable to the conservation and management of underwater heritage, but that practitioners involved in that field need to really understand the underlying ICOMOS philosophy and apply the concepts to the underwater field with common sense. To encourage the cross-fertilisation of ideas, it is necessary for the practitioners experienced in land-based conservation using Burra to increase their participation in meetings and conferences discussing underwater heritage, and for those involved in the research and conservation of underwater heritage to increase their participation in similar fora discussing land-based conservation. This will encourage a more vigorous exchange of views on the application of ICOMOS principles to underwater sites. And by “participation” I mean just that - not merely “attendance”. Such an exchange will benefit both camps, and may lead to a more unified and intellectually active approach to conservation philosophy and standards in Australia, and perhaps in the wider region and other parts of the world.

References