The Upper Mersey River Valley, Tasmania: assessing cultural values in a natural area

The Upper Mersey and its people

Many visitors to Tasmania probably know the Mersey only as the river-mouth harbour at Devonport — home of the passenger/car ship Spirit of Tasmania, and the place where it berths on arrival across Bass Strait from Melbourne. A long way upstream, the river becomes the Upper Mersey south of the farmland of Mole Creek and Liena. It cuts through from heavily forested gorge country between the Western Tiers escarpment, hard on the left to the east, and the more distant northern peaks of the Cradle Mountain-Lake St Clair National Park to the west (like Cradle Mountain and Barn Bluff).

The river valley here is rugged and glaciated, with bench intermediate plateaus like the Borradaile Plains, Maggs Mountain, and February Plains on its broader western side. Some 30-40 kilometres upstream from Liena (as the crow flies ... ), the Mersey exits from the national park after meandering through a deep, long and twisting valley flanked by mountain peaks. At this point, the river has traced a broad loop, shepherd's crook-style, from its source away to the east, up amongst some of the thousands of lakes on the Central Plateau behind the Western Tiers ramparts.

Despite their aura of wild power, these landscapes show a long history of European activity since the 1830s. The high country has been a focus for grazing, hunting, fishing, horse-riding, and walking. So, too, have the valley floor and lower plateaus, but they have also been subject to more recent hydroelectric development (with Lakes Rowallan and Parangana interrupting the Mersey's flow), forestry, and additional recreational pursuits. The Mersey White Water Forest Reserve between the two lakes is known as a world class canoeing course, for example.

Local people in the dairying-grazing country north of the Tiers have had an association with this part of Tasmania well before its more recent popularity amongst bushwalkers from the cities. They have used it for the whole range of high country activities named above, including recreation, but see themselves as firmly within the tradition of mountain cattlemen and others who made a living or supplemented their incomes from the area. There is continuity of use amongst many of the families, perhaps at its most tangible in respect of mountain huts. People are often eloquent in the area's praises as a landscape of beauty and historical memory, and fiercely defensive of a long-standing community stewardship role.

Some of the features of their involvement with the Upper Mersey have recently been defined in an anthropological study of traditional practices in the Tasmanian Wilderness World Heritage Area. The high country was been regarded as a kind of commons. Separate small town communities used virtually exclusive territories. 'The mountain', as some parts of the high country were called, was a place where aspects of social reproduction occurred, and activities such as horse-riding were means by which people were linked to
the land. The anthropologist’s report also found that many use patterns continued despite their prohibition when the World Heritage Management Plan was first proclaimed, in 1992.

**Conflict in the valley**

The management plan was not the first substantial change affecting the use of the area, but it led to opposition on an organised scale. Communities saw it as preventing activities they and their forebears had been involved in for generations, particularly on the Central Plateau; for example, horse-riding was prohibited in some parts, and otherwise regulated. Previously, the proclamation of the Walls of Jerusalem National Park had already outlawed riding and hunting within its borders. The plan was seen as the latest of a series of inconsiderate, non-consultative changes imposed by the heavy hand of bureaucracy. And this time the changes were attributable to the wilderness ethic. The removal of traditional uses was interpreted as the political ascendancy of city-based conservationists, as well their ecology-based philosophy of how humans ought to interact with wild nature.

Ultimately, some concessions were made by the World Heritage Area planners, but the locals thought they had not gone nearly far enough. The World Heritage Area nomination had been based on natural values and, in the cultural sphere, on Aboriginal archaeological deposits. In general, studies for the 1992 plan had concentrated on the natural side. In view of these factors and the conflict itself, which showed no signs of abating, the author and Simon Cubit, a Tasmanian historian with personal connections to the local communities, obtained National Estate Grants Program funding in 1995 to assess European cultural values in the Upper Mersey.

**The Upper Mersey cultural values study approach**

The proposal was to broadly follow the part of the Australian Heritage Commission’s regional assessment approach devoted to cultural values, principally as implemented in Victoria’s Central Highlands and East Gippsland, which defined these as historic, social, and aesthetic. Assessment of cultural values over the 1000 kilometres or so area of the Upper Mersey would be followed by nominations to the National Estate Register, if applicable. It was thought that the values of wider communities of interest beyond the local should be included, but lack of funds will most likely prevent that. Aboriginal values have also been excluded, to keep the work manageable. It was known that Tasmanian Aboriginal communities were planning to conduct their own surveys in the World Heritage Area, with a view to taking part in its management.

Following its assessment of cultural values, the project is also to compare its methods and results with those of the traditional practices study, aiming to
The World Heritage Area covers the Upper Mersey to the extent that it includes Cradle Mountain-Lake St Clair National Park, part of which is in the valley; the high country Walls of Jerusalem National Park on the Central Plateau (which incorporates the Mersey's source), and other high country in the Central Plateau Conservation Area and Protected Area. The other main land designation in the Upper Mersey is State Forest, but there are some privately-owned parcels associated with upland grazing.


The project is now well advanced, with a contextual history written by Simon Cubit, and a database, set up to meet both Heritage Commission and state agency recording requirements, that shows a substantial number of historic site entries. Meetings have been held with community members to gather data on social and aesthetic values. Following analysis of these values and integration of data, the study team, which now includes Chris Johnston (Context Pty Ltd) and John Hepper (Hepper Marriott Tasmania Pty Ltd) on a consultancy basis, will go back to the community for discussion and validation of results sometime in the first quarter of 1997. This process is intended to be interactive, and hopefully will fill any gaps in information and understanding. National Estate nominations and methodological discussions and reporting will follow.

Already there are obvious differences between this study and the Heritage Commission's regional assessment process. Because the local communities are small, with residents numbered in the hundreds rather than thousands, the team has been able to adopt a fine-grained approach. Data on social and aesthetic values has been gained from small, 'kitchen table' discussion groups comprised of uniform categories of users; for example, walkers and horse-riders, rather than from larger mixed public meetings. The team is keen to see what effects this might have on the results.

Conclusion

Apart from the hoped-for methodological improvements, this project is principally aimed at filling a gap in knowledge about land which is a part of the World Heritage Area and other land in the valley managed mostly by Forestry Tasmania. Until now, the focus in the Upper Mersey has been on natural values, with but a meagre understanding of its cultural values. The kinds of conflict mentioned above will not be addressed directly by the study team. Their premise is that the cultural values information they can record will be subsequently available so that policy makers and managers can deliberate on the ramifications. However, if heritage is moving more towards concepts that include community ownership, and if such changes have stewardship connotations, it would be a pity if some kinds of closer co-operation between the local residents and the bureaucracies did not follow the identification of important community cultural values.