Travel routes, dreaming tracks and cultural heritage: perspectives on Australian cultural routes

Introduction: travelling in a vast continent

The International Congress on World-wide Cultural Routes, held over 17–22 May 1999, in Ibiza, Spain marked significant changes in concepts of heritage and heritage places that are very relevant to Australia. We are avid travellers across our sprawling continent. Aboriginal Australians have been linking their special places over vast distances with trails, or 'dreaming tracks', over 50,000 years. When European settlers arrived, just over 200 years ago, they often used the Aboriginal trails to explore and settle remote parts of the continent.

Commentator on perceptions of the Australian landscape, Tim Flannery, points out in his book *The Explorers* the irony of the loss of knowledge of the Australian continent during the classic age of European exploration. He is referring to the detailed knowledge of the continent held by Aboriginal peoples at the time Europeans arrived. Yet, by the end of the 19th century, vast areas had become depopulated or were used only occasionally by mostly European pastoralists, who knew little about the land they crossed. A map, which reconstructs indigenous language groups, highlights what has been lost — it indicates that almost all of the Australian continent, even the driest desert, was lived-in and used by Aboriginal nations.

As land barriers were overcome and settlement spread inland, the links from the growing coastal settlements to the 'red centre' and beyond to Europe were tenuous and isolating. It took immense investment by 19th-century colonial governments in industrial technologies such as the railway and telegraph, and in the highways of early this century, to overcome the challenge of distance. These 19th and early 20th-century travel and communication routes are strong linear concentrations of activity and meaning, with connected sites and features imprinted on a vast continent. Parts

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Figure 1. The Feho Overland Telegraph Station, South Australia. Photo by David Young, 1990.
of these continent-wide routes are used by tourists who are the modern pilgrims, seeking out the continent’s isolated interior to find renewal in contact with the natural environment and, increasingly, rediscovering indigenous culture.

A sacred geography of ‘The Dreaming’

Aboriginal people used trails and paths extending thousands of kilometres to provide contact networks for the exchange of both goods and ideas. The Australian continent is overlain by a matrix of such long distance exchange, and by social and ceremonial linkages, often continent-wide, that bind individuals and societies.4 The routes along which people and goods move were, and are, traditionally sanctioned in the lines of travel of the ancestral beings: in The Dreaming, or The Dreamtime, these ancestral beings created the land and its features. They also established the law for human actions. These included rights to the resources of the land, as well as responsibilities for the health of its ecosystems, plants and animals. The lines of travel, often called Dreaming Tracks – or if associated with particular mythology or song cycles, Story Lines, or Song Lines – are the ‘sacred geography’ of Australia, visible in Aboriginal paintings and engravings or depicted in body painting and sacred objects.5

Australian Dreaming sites provide an outstanding example of the embedding in the landscape of the complex religious system of hunting and gathering societies. As yet there is no comparative, continent-wide study of Dreaming Tracks and other religious sites. The nature and types of Aboriginal religious expression, and the way in which this expression is embodied in the landscape, has been only sparsely documented, and very little of this work has incorporated a heritage perspective or included the views of Aboriginal people.4 There are good reasons for this – it is very difficult to document in meaningful and sensitive ways the significance of such powerful spiritual and cultural linkages.

According to Dr Isabel McBryde’s work, the complex long distance exchange networks which linked – and still link – the Aboriginal societies of Australia are among the most extensive in the hunter-gatherer world. McBryde has recorded the archaeology and ethnohistory of distributions of axes and axestone across southeastern Australia. The exchange networks of the Lake Eyre/Cooper Basin in eastern central Australia were also extensive, with goods such as red ochre for body painting and sandstone grinding slabs being traded over thousands of kilometres from the southern oceans to the Gulf of Carpentaria.

The significance of these complex systems of human communication lies not only in their physical extent and our anthropological construction of this, but also in their social importance to Aboriginal people. Yet, even at the national level, these places have only limited recognition and protection. Commonwealth and State legislation protects the archaeological record of the Aboriginal past, but traditional living sites are often not well documented or protected. The exception is the Northern Territory, where the Aboriginal Sacred Sites (NT) Act of 1989 does protect traditional sites.
Linking Australia to Asia and Europe

The Australian continent was colonised after the industrial revolution and industrial technologies were used to meet the immense challenges of distance. Steam locomotion and, later, the internal combustion engine, were used to move massive amounts of goods and large numbers of people in the colonising process. Nineteenth-century steamships carried large numbers of migrants from Europe and Asia, in journeys taking up to three months at the beginning of the century, and returned with Australian wool and other produce. Intact 19th-century ports can still be seen in Australia, such as Fremantle in Western Australia, which were once part of world-wide trading and passenger routes. Long distance telegraph connected colonial capitals with London and European commercial centres and, within Australia, linked distant edges of the continent.

From the 1870s, telegraph lines such as that linking Adelaide to Darwin and ultimately to the European and Asian worlds, or that crossing the Nullarbor Plain, linking eastern and western Australia, were built. Around the coastal periphery of the continent, strings of light stations and navigational aids created safer conditions for sea travel and transport on global sea routes. A series of 400 lighthouses were gradually built, their protection extending to the windswept and isolated parts of Australia's extensive coastal landscapes.

This legacy of 19th-century industrial systems is a distinctive aspect of Australia's heritage. Yet there are difficult issues regarding the preservation of transport and communication systems that are now mostly obsolete, and which have often been partially or completely dismantled. Others are fated for 'asset disposal' by governments. These issues must be taken up by cultural resource managers if we are to keep those places and landscapes that represent 19th and 20th-century industrial societies.

Early explorers often used Aboriginal knowledge of the land and its resources to move around the landscape. Tim Flannery describes how the early explorers frequently relied on Aboriginal guides to find water, especially in extensive desert areas. In heavily forested environments, Aboriginal pathways up ridgelines formed the basis of routes taken by explorers and by the settlers who followed to utilise natural resources such as timber, minerals and grasslands. These routes are the basis of the transport corridors used today.

A richly layered cultural route - the mound springs of inland South Australia

The mound springs of northern South Australia are the natural setting for a richly layered cultural route that brings together many of the themes of this paper - both in the Aboriginal and historical contexts. They also highlight the importance of water as a decisive factor in determining lines of travel across the world's most arid continent.
The mound springs of inland Australia are of outstanding scientific and cultural importance. Artesian springs occur throughout the world in arid and semi-arid regions. In central and inland Australia, the mound springs are natural outlets for the waters of the Great Artesian Basin, one of the largest underground water storage sources in the world. They are known locally as mound springs because of their characteristic cone or mound shape, caused by the deposit of mineral salts over a long period. They are important flora and fauna refuges that often reflect a locally specific biodiversity. They contain endemic plant and animal life, as well as the remains of extinct species from an ancient past.

As permanent sources of drinkable water in a desert environment, they have been a focus for human activity over thousands of years. Aboriginal people relied heavily on them in dry times, and the springs are rich in archaeological material. They are often linked over vast distances, connected by the actions of Dreamtime ancestors. European explorers used them as 'stepping stones' to the interior; early pastoral stations were centered on them and the alignments of the Overland Telegraph and the narrow-gauge Ghan railway line between Marree and Oodnadatta were largely dictated by the alignment of the springs.

The mound springs were central to the Aboriginal use of the area, and late-Holocene habitation sites have been recorded by archaeologists. The Lake Eyre Basin is the focus of many Dreaming Tracks, and several stories relate to more extensive routes from the Adelaide region to Kakadu. For example, the Arabunna people of the far north of South Australia maintain the traditional knowledge of those parts of the routes passing through their country. Several Dreaming stories connect the community and their ancestors to this vast landscape.

The European explorer John McDouall Stuart was in the area in 1859, surveying potential pastoral runs and looking for a route towards Central Australia and on to
the north coast of Australia. Stuart was delighted to discover the line of springs, which he used in his final successful crossing of the continent in 1861–2. The present Stuart Highway, the main north-south highway transversing inland Australia, is to the west of the explorer's route.

Stuart's journeys were partly funded by pastoral and mining interests, and cattle were quickly moved into the area as pastoral leases were taken up on the native grasslands around the springs. By the early 20th-century, large numbers of Aboriginal people had been forced off their traditional land. Many of the Arabunna went to live at a mission on Finnis Springs Station, near Marree.

Figure 3 Arabunna tour 'the lake, the desert and the Dreaming'. Photo by Duncan Marshall 1999.

Early pastoralists stocked the country at excessively high rates - and when drought hit, the stock numbers crashed. The pastoral industry in the region later stabilised, adapting to the cycle of drought and fluctuating local and overseas markets. From the late-19th century onwards, the sinking of numerous artesian bores for stock lessened the dependence on the mound springs. The homesteads and outbuildings, fences, bores and other features associated with these pastoral stations remain as a distinctive part of the cultural heritage of the region.

Towards the end of the 19th century, camels were the main carriers in these areas, which were too dry for horse or bullock teams. Most camel drivers came from Pakistan, but they were known as 'Afghans' in Australia. Their distinctive religion and way of life added to the diverse mix of inland Australia.

The idea of a telegraph connection to the north coast, to link-up with the submarine link from Darwin to Asia and overland to Britain, was part of the reason the South Australian government supported Stuart in his final expeditions. With relatively
minor deviation, the Overland Telegraph constructed in the early 1870s followed the line of Stuart’s exploration. The water supply provided by the springs was instrumental in the selection of the route and location of the repeater stations required to transmit the signal. The opening of the narrow-gauge Central Australian Railway to Oodnadatta in 1891 illustrated the connections between mound springs and early European activity in the region. The mound springs had allowed Stuart direct access to Central Australia: it was the mound springs that encouraged pastoralists to follow in his wake, and it was to service the pastoral industry that the railway was primarily built.  

European utilisation has had a devastating effect on the mound springs – early high stocking rates have had a destructive impact on the pastures around the springs, though later fencing-off of the springs and installation of piping and troughs to water stock helped to conserve the aquatic vegetation. From the late 19th century, the sinking of numerous artesian bores has taken the emphasis off the mound springs as a water source for stock. This activity has also caused a dramatic reduction in the flow of many mound springs, with the result that many have ceased to function.

Heavily degraded by unregulated flow from bores and over a century of pastoralism, the springs were given relatively little attention until recently. In the past decade, two key areas have been acquired for the national parks system and other important springs on pastoral country have been fenced. Some indigenous owners and custodians have become involved in management. Considerable traditional knowledge about managing the country exists within Aboriginal communities, but is often not recognised or utilised effectively in managing these places. Studies of the natural and cultural heritage values of the springs have been undertaken and potential world heritage values explored. The issue of sustainable use of the waters of the Great Artesian Basin is still a big challenge – how can the economic, social, environmental and heritage interests be balanced?

Conclusion

There are several distinctive features of Australian travel routes that can be emphasised:

- Many Australian travel routes have a vast scale. The most impressive are continent-wide linear features found in often-dramatic natural settings, linking isolated coastal cities around the continent to one another and to Asia and Europe.
- The Australian landscape is criss-crossed by an extensive network of indigenous routes and Dreaming Tracks. In a global context, these are significant examples that demonstrate the complexity of indigenous land-based knowledge systems, which can be understood in the context of a continuing culture.
- Activities and meanings converge in specific locations in a vast landscape. Australian travel routes often have multiple natural and cultural heritage values that demonstrate the close interrelation of the natural and cultural environments
and the way in which values are often layered. There are a number of important issues related to the recognition and conservation of cultural routes in an Australian context. The first is the ongoing struggle for contemporary recognition of indigenous oral traditions and knowledge. This traditional knowledge is a valuable resource for enhancing the understanding of otherwise Western-dominated views of the landscape. The second is that the complexity of the issue requires the development of protection mechanisms across different levels of government, private owners, indigenous owners and custodians. Any solution must recognise and address the full range of heritage values. Finally, we must find future uses that are compatible, sustainable and sensitive to the various natural and cultural values along the routes: for example, nature based tourism that includes Aboriginal guides, and heritage trails that link historic sites and features into thematic travel routes.

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references


endnotes

1 This paper was presented at the International Congress on World-wide Cultural Routes, 17-22 May 1999, Ibiza, Spain.
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