Victorian Goldfields: Tentative World Heritage Listing

There have been various proposals for including the Victorian goldfields on the Australian tentative list of World Heritage places.

In August 1988 Australia ICOMOS conducted a five-day travelling conference across the Victorian goldfields and a whole issue of *Historic Environment* (Vol. 7, no. 1, 1989) was devoted to reporting on this event. At the same time Federal Government politicians in the marginal seats of Bendigo and Ballarat became interested in the advantages of World Heritage listing of the goldfields which their electorates covered. Numerous papers were prepared, but all to no avail.

In 1989 Mike Pearson published a definitive paper in the now sadly defunct National Trust magazine, *Heritage Australia* investigating whether Australian Historic Places had World Heritage quality – today we would say outstanding universal values! (Pearson, 1989:vol 8, pp10-14) He concluded that the themes of colonial settlement, convictism, technological or creative achievements of universal interest and the nineteenth century gold rushes would provide candidate places. Gold rush places in fact include all these themes. And some of you will remember that Henry Cleere’s eminent colleagues, Sir Bernard Fielden and Sir Neil Cossons, came in the 1980s to look at outstanding universal values exemplified in industrial remnants in the colonies.

As we have heard, the indicative list fell out of political favour but the goldfields still retain their outstanding universal values for a range of World Heritage categories:

Central Victorian Goldfields - maintaining a complex cultural landscape

Background:

Gold discoveries transformed Australian landscapes from the mid-nineteenth century and brought waves of immigrants from foreign countries who helped to shape a distinctive Australian identity. The impact of gold resulted in patterns of settlement and physical remains that distinguish the Australian goldmining landscapes from those of California, New Zealand or Africa. That impact was sudden, brutal and lasting in its transformation of natural areas.

Many Australian natural areas may be regarded as cultural landscapes because of Aboriginal impacts on natural systems. The term cultural landscape is applied to areas of landscape including landscapes where natural features have special meanings to people such as traditional Aboriginal Australian landscapes, to highly modified or developed landscapes. That land may have continuing use or may be a collection of extant remains.

The Central Victorian Goldfields, an Ordovician landscape with some Tertiary volcanic overlays, were massively impacted during the gold rushes from the 1850s. The sequential occupancy of the landscape by agents ranging from Aboriginals, European explorers, squatters, travellers, road makers, surveyors, alluvial gold
diggers, company miners, farmers, foresters, township builders and civic use providers (churches, schools, gardens and cultural institutes) created impacts and patterns which can still be identified today in the montage of public forested patches and cleared freehold lands which make up the landscape of the central goldfields. Understanding the history of sequential occupation of the land in this period of dramatic change is essential for understanding the cultural landscapes of the Victorian goldfields (Lennon, 1989:24).

Geoffrey Blainey summarized this landscape change, "We might call it devastation; they called it pioneering" (Blainey, 1984:128). The physical evidence of this transformation may be seen today: in patches of forest covering diggings unworked since the 1850s; in isolated systems of earthworks and abandoned machinery footings often near filled-in shafts; in rural landscape patterns created by the surveyors subdividing the land into farm lots, road and public reserves and leaving creek frontages; in buildings and towns large and small constructed in that era; in shires and boroughs now eclipsed and amalgamated with their neighbours, but leaving their names and administrative buildings stranded in rural isolation bypassed by twentieth-century city development. The ordered landscape of neat townships and small farms, some enclosed by hedges, still has an English character. That character is threatened by the current phase of rural residential subdivision and government asset sales of unused road reserves resulting in cutting up some of the long established patterns in the landscape. The forest reserves themselves are remnants of once extensive ecosystems and especially in the box and ironbark forests represent a diminishing resource.

Issues:

One of the major issues is that the residents, visitors and official regulators of the Central Victorian Goldfields do not refer to their environs as a cultural landscape, but rather as an historic area. From the 1870s, about thirty-five years after the initial European occupation of the colony, Victorians have developed a long cultural tradition of being concerned about their history. The concept of the 'Garden State' was readily adopted in the 1970s by the citizens at the same time as Victoria pioneered conservation legislation for historic buildings, Aboriginal relics and land conservation management. Victorians therefore became used to seeing the landscape components as discrete entities, rather than as a layered whole which is required for cultural landscape nomination. Existing municipal/local authority planning schemes refer to landscape protection for areas of high quality visual amenity and to protection of sites (ie buildings, works, objects, sites and areas) of historic, architectural or archaeological significance which form an important component of the locale's cultural heritage. There is a concentration on the visual and the historic. By contrast, the essence of a cultural landscape is in its internal consistency, patterns and traditions, and these may not necessarily be observable from a single vantage point or route. A landscape's visual secrets may hold the clues to its significance.
However, the reality of administration and management has been that the Central Victorian Goldfields has been divided among many municipalities. There were thirty-eight municipal administrations at the time of the 1988 Central Victorian Goldfields Conference, which reaffirmed "that the central goldfields region is a place of cultural importance to the nation" (Dunstan, 1989:48). Subsequent Kennett Government amalgamations of municipalities into five larger administrative areas (viz. Greater Bendigo, Mount Alexander, Central Goldfields, Hepburn and City of Ballarat) has not led to a more integrated approach. In addition, the State Government's Environment Conservation Council, in its recent draft recommendations for the remnant box-ironbark forests of the region, did not recognize the national values and possible World Heritage values of the area, despite public protest meetings in some regional towns.

The cultural landscape is at risk in planning its conservation management because of all the components contributing to the richness and diversity through layers of various elements of different themes, periods and patterns. The cultural landscape exhibits extensive values of both landform and historical diversity. Extensive values are most often included under the Australian Heritage Commission National Estate sub-criteria A3 (diversity), A4 (course and pattern of history), B2 (rarity), D2 (type or representativeness) and E1 (aesthetic value). For example, the landscape stretching across to Mt Alexander from Mt Tarrengower can be viewed as an entity expressing all the above values, while components within it will have site specific values including existence and geoheritage values. Guidelines and management strategies should address the particular protection needs of each type of value and its physical expression (Lennon, 1993, vol.2, 11-15).

Maintenance of cultural values in a relict landscape illustrating phases of mining and containing surviving fabric (earthworks, structures, machinery) requires stabilization of the features, often with intrusive methods such as removal of vegetation regrowth, management of access and use of the place. Components such as machinery should be left in situ so that their functional relationship can be seen and interpreted where appropriate.

Management of change in a continuing landscape such as one with agriculture and pastoral activities requires identification of the key components and an assessment of whether the proposed changes will affect the inherent characteristics of those components in the cultural landscape, for example, clearing of unused road reserves containing stands of mature trees or addition of new farm buildings.

The main pressures on the cultural landscape arise from ignorance of its integrated character and inconsistent planning scheme provisions which allow altering the physical evidence of previous activities such as new mining at historic mine sites, transformation of farmland to rural residential units, township expansion and tourist developments and physical decay of the surviving elements.

There is value in adopting consistent indicators to measure the state of and
pressures on cultural landscape systems (Lennon, 1997:25-6). Indicators for State of Environment reporting are practical and, as the statistics which could be used for them have been collected since the 1960s for most municipalities, they should allow a clearer scrutiny of any trends. Statistics will provide data for establishing benchmarks for measuring changes in how features of the cultural landscape are being managed. These data, as with the property valuation study in Maldon (Budge et al., 1992), will allow the impact of heritage controls on the landscape to be measured.

It was suggested that data collection for a defined landscape (based on local government areas) cover the following:

- Number and range/type of places added to heritage registers annually
- Number of planning permits issued annually for residential development, tourist facilities and rural residential subdivision, and the number of building repair orders
- Number of mining permits issued
- Periodic calculation of vegetation coverage to assess rates of removal and regrowth
- Number and type of tourist facilities developed over a specified period
- Number of gazetted historic places monitored and maintained by conservation works over a specified period.

As it is important to adopt a holistic approach to conserving the cultural landscape and its component layers, it is necessary to monitor the pressures affecting those components. However, specific suggestions for indicators for the Victorian goldfields have not been followed either at the national or the State reporting level.

Current status:

The potential of the region to represent a neglected universal theme - of population movement for economic gain (gold rushes) - has been mooted on various occasions as shown above. However, all places to date forwarded by the national government to the World Heritage Bureau in Paris for assessment and eventual listing have been natural and/or indigenous places. Currently there are two nominations with historic/cultural values of outstanding universal significance under consideration: the Sydney Opera House nomination and a serial site nomination of Australian Convict sites.

The Central Victorian box-ironbark forests could be considered for World Heritage listing under various categories: as part of the serial site nomination of Eucalypts if these forests are considered as part of the National List, or as an historic place (Central Victorian goldfields) which could be as either a cultural landscape itself (organically evolving category although there are relict and associative landscapes within the goldfields as well), or as part of a serial site nomination for Australian goldfields, again assuming they are included on the National List.
From an outstanding universal values perspective the Central Victorian goldfields have the potential for listing as World Heritage. However, it needs to be considered in relationship to other Australian places of the same theme and era and then comparatively with other goldfields across the world. As an organically evolving cultural landscape exhibiting evidence of all previous phases of human occupation and use and a variety of place types, it has great potential.

The World Heritage nomination process is a political one as the State must agree to the nomination as well as the national government. The Commonwealth government is about to introduce legislation to create a list of places of national significance. The new Victorian State Government as one of its election promises proposed World Heritage listing of the gold fields. Yet its Environment Conservation Council current deliberations regarding the future management of the box-ironbark forests, which dot the goldfields area do not give much hope for recognition of the outstanding universal values which co-exist with the lesser timber values.

Community knowledge of the outstanding universal values of the proposed places is therefore essential. Currently the National Parks Service is working on the Mount Alexander Diggings and there is increased research being conducted in partnership with the University of Melbourne. This follows on from David Bannear’s 5 years of studying each mining district within the goldfields but it appears that a World Heritage nomination is not high on the political agenda.

References