WHOSE VIEWS COUNT?:
ACHIEVING COMMUNITY SUPPORT FOR
LANDSCAPE CONSERVATION

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INTRODUCTION

On Day 1 of the Conference the term cultural landscape was given a beating (perhaps undeserved) and virtually tossed aside. However, the discussion revealed at least five important reasons for pursuing the notion of cultural landscape:

• Cultural landscape provides a broader notion of places, linking the disaggregated aspects of the environment - natural, Aboriginal, historic - and requiring integration of our techniques, criteria, etc. This was seen as valuable but challenging (or perhaps too hard).

• Cultural landscape encourages us to see the values in ordinary places and vernacular landscapes.

• Cultural landscape demands the recognition and understanding of more of the components or aspects of a place.

• Cultural landscape may lead to a practice of better environmental care for all places.

• Cultural landscape may lead to some links being created between those who care about different aspects of the environment - especially the creation of links with and resolution of conflict between ourselves and the (so called) 'green' environment movement.

This paper links whose views count in our current conservation practices and the dilemmas and difficulties that result, with what we seek to achieve (as described in the five points above).

As a question 'whose views count?' can be simply answered. Our views count and those of the non-professional community don't. This isn't the way it should be. And amongst those here today some people's views count more than others; for example, those who hold the money are usually more able to give sway to their views.

At the Australian Heritage Commission's seminars in 1986 I asked people to put their hands up to find out where they participated in the 'heritage system'. Very few said they were involved as activists for conservation in their local community. Repeating the exercise at this conference would probably produce much the same outcome. My (untested) hypothesis about the power structure within the cultural heritage sector would propose the following hierarchy:

• politicians
• government bureaucrats (those who hold the money and information, and advise the politicians)
• local government
• consultants
• voluntary conservation groups
• the community

If the community's views did count, especially at the local level, then all of us would be active at the local level. And if the community's views counted we would consult them. Given how powerless most professionals in the field appear to feel, it is not surprising that one often hears a sad resignation to demolition proposals by those far less powerful.

I believe that we should feel some disquiet about who's views count. There are, of course, issues of equity and democracy and while I do not intend to pursue them in this paper, they should not be overlooked. More fundamental to our conservation objective is the need to build political support; today this means mass community support, rather than the power of the expert or the notable individual. As well we need to recognise that our current heritage power and information structures haven't resulted in a very effective form of landscape conservation practice.

Some of these fundamental contradictions between the techniques and methods we use and these larger objectives are examined below.

THE ISSUES

My critique of current practice hinges on a number of concerns that can be summarised as:

• our failure to build community awareness of the values in the landscapes we seek to protect
• separation of cultural and natural
• being pseudo-scientific and over-methodological
• allowing the professionalisation of conservation to push aside 'non-professionals'
• relying on a narrow set of values within a country where diversity is increasingly apparent and accepted.
These points, with a few examples, are discussed briefly with some of the counter arguments to increased community participation.

**Failure to build community awareness**

Community awareness of landscape issues - as we have been talking about them, is still minimal. In Victoria landscape still usually means 'visual'. The 'connected' or ecological vision that motivated much of the 1960s and 70s landscape movement became seen as part of the environment movement, but the environment movement has become increasingly green in its orientation and equally focused on special places in its public campaigns rather than on sound environmental care. The 'conservation society' notion, one of the most powerful and integrating, is now old-fashioned and out of date.

Ironically while most people think landscape means 'visual', places valued merely for their visual values continue to fail to be listed on the Register of the National Estate. In Victoria the National Trust established the Landscape Preservation Council in 1960, only four years after the Trust was formed in that State. Yet people still express surprise that the Trust is involved in 'landscape' conservation issues. Historic buildings issues have given, and continue to give, the Trust a higher profile than landscape issues; so the Trust puts more resources into buildings and the vicious circle continues. This is only one example of why we fail to increase community awareness of the broader view of cultural heritage that we are calling cultural landscape.

An almost heretical question needs to be asked: Is identifying and listing places the most effective way to conserve them? Many have suggested it is not (although the required analysis has not been done). One was Dr J M Powell in an article in *Landscape Australia* in 1979. In writing about (cultural) landscapes he argued that if we want to develop a conservation ethos we need to move some of our energies away from just identifying special places. In addition to programs in primary, secondary and tertiary education, he proposed some activities with the aim of promoting 'a new and continuing discovery by people who are still strangers in their own territory'.

An additional reason for moving away from the identifying special places (where everything not identified is not special) is that listing is how we commodify places; make them consumable (and disposable) - rather than how we built an ethos of environmental care.

**Separating natural and cultural**

A second concern is the impact of the separation of natural and cultural places in much Federal and State legislation (and in all the subsequent regulations and practices) on our abilities to present the notion of landscape to the community.

At present the most successful parts of the conservation movement in Australia are those concerned with the natural environment; those motivated to conserve nature. In England, for example, the ethos of 'countryside conservation' seems to have grown from the notion of keeping of a few 'wild' places to conserving rural landscapes. This has not yet happened in Australia. And in terms of creating a political force we haven't achieved the amalgamation of values and organisations we need to tackle the complex of values associated with broader landscapes.

Even more concerning are the images produced by the nature conservation movement to present places worth conserving to the public. Without exception such places are those without any evidence of people or their activities. The increasing reliance on beautiful images to sell the conservation of places also counts against 'ugly' cultural landscapes. While these approaches may currently suit one conservation end, it is certain to work against our efforts and discussion of this issue is becoming increasingly urgent.

**'Science' of conservation**

Practitioners have felt the pressure to be rigorous and establish methods with reproducible results; applying the scientific method to a process that is about value judgements. Getting caught up in debates about the technical processes of 'how' can distract us from asking 'why'. What are the ends we are seeking to achieve and are the assessment processes we use really achieving our ends? More and more we adopt standard processes (and briefs) assuming the ends are always the same.

These technical assessment skills have now been refined beyond what the ordinary person can easily comprehend; while this refinement may be an important part of the intellectual development of our disciplines, it has little real value if it doesn't help conserve places.

The science of conservation; the detailed study and careful application of criteria, is a game now played by those seeking conservation and those seeking economic gain and each can use the methods to 'prove' their case. Further development of our techniques may give us pleasure but it's a game that all can play and seems no more effective in establishing the conservation value of a place than were the more informal approaches used some years ago. However, it does take up far more of the scarce resources of the relatively underfunded conservation sector (especially the voluntary organisations which still undertake much of the research, identification and assessment work).

Better assessment techniques also don't mean that the recommendations are more likely to be implemented; even where there is no concerted anti-conservation lobby. Implementing recommendations is about political processes, not technical skills. Often studies aren't done to enable action to be taken, but rather to quieten a lobby group. Decisions about priorities for the funding of...
studies may (reasonably) reflect the significance of the place without considering the political climate for implementing the results. One study well-implemented is surely worth ten sitting on a shelf. And regrettably those who are developing the better techniques (and in most States that’s usually consultants doing funded studies) are often not involved in implementing the results, thus removing another opportunity for testing our assessment techniques against the real needs of conservation in a local area.

**Professionalising conservation**

The professionalisation of conservation has meant the exploitation of local community experts by professionals. We pick their brains but don’t share the fun or the profits. As has been argued elsewhere, the voluntary organisations and individuals that have been defenders of their local heritage for many years shouldn’t be cast aside so lightly. As professionals we are riding on their backs, benefiting from their efforts in the past.

One question often raised is if we, as professionals, involve local people in our assessment processes, how do we fit their input into our ‘scientific’ framework. Underlying the question is the view that our judgements are more important than those of non-professionals, rather than that each is different, and has its own value and place in the process.

And even though we see ourselves as the professional defenders of our nation’s heritage, we all fear that on the bigger national agenda our views don’t count much either. This sense of insecurity, common in many professions, makes it harder for us to work creatively outside an oppositional mode and to share our power (however limited) with others less-powerful (such as local residents). 5

The professional jealousies and the inter-organisation rivalries that seem to characterize our field reflect this sense of powerlessness. Until we can feel more confident - we will keep others out - and it won’t be possible to build forms of practice that encourage the community to learn about and identify the values they attach to familiar places.

**Same place, different values**

Other speakers at the Conference have said that while National Estate is a common symbol for a nation, people value places for different reasons. A place may have different meanings, depending on one’s culture and experience. Zube has asked (but not yet answered) whether those who experience a place on a day-to-day basis evaluate it differently from the professional whose primary experience may be related to the appraisal task and who has never lived, worked or played therein, and how do factors such as class, ethnicity, environmental familiarity influence judgements? Probably there are differences and rather than the expense of seeking proof we should simply involve more people, achieving several ends at once.

To some extent the notion of social value in the Burra Charter has been seen as a way of including others. Aesthetic, historic and scientific value are described almost in terms of criteria; social value ‘embraces the qualities for which a place has become a focus of spiritual, political, national or other cultural sentiment to a majority or minority group’. It demands the inclusion of other views, but also implies that the ‘non-professional’ view would be segregated from the rigorous assessment of the other three values. Including social value in the Charter means we can all feel better - our social conscience resolved.

**SO WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?**

Other professions have faced similar dilemmas. Landscape perceptions studies grew from a concern by experts that they may not be reflecting community preferences, and yet the studies themselves lead to the growth of a new professional area, characterized by sophisticated methods, involving people in producing ‘data’ but rarely in analysing or acting on the results.

Our dilemmas have also been debated and proposals developed about how to explore incorporating other values into our assessment, but little has been done. For example the AHC seminars recommended exploring community-based approaches and exploring what Alison Blake called the ‘experiential approach’. 6 Recently the AHC has funded a project examining the question ‘What is social value?’ - a proposal by the National Trust arising from a study of Melbourne’s western region and framed in terms of the Burra Charter, thus only covering part of my concerns. 7

As well as advocates for wide participation, there are well-argued cases against. For example Dr Miles Lewis has argued that the connoisseur is a better judge of the value of a place than the broader community. To some extent I share his view, but believe we should look at why this is so. Two key differences between the connoisseur and the community are information and experience. The connoisseur or expert has both a lot of information about a place (and other similar places) and has experience in considering the value of the place. Many of the approaches to visual/scenic assessment do not overcome these differences as they are based on ‘opinion polls’ where people are asked what they like, but are not given material that might inform their decision. Nor do these techniques allow participants to learn from one assessment and develop the experience and judgement that is part of the definition of connoisseurs. The community doesn’t need opinion polls - people need increased opportunities for discovery and participation if we are seeking more informed debate on landscape.
One of problems with continuing to rely on experts is that today their views count far less than in the past. It is mass support based on informed community debate that is needed to achieve political support. And the level of community sophistication on many issues is increasing rapidly. We need to question whether our practices in heritage conservation are encouraging more and more people to become connoisseurs; knowledgeable and informed on the issues.

Nor would I advocate professionals seeing themselves as the educators and the community as those that need educating. We can learn much from the community. By acting as the educators we are just trying to keep control; to control the information, the values, the perspectives, rather than joining in as equals in the process of 'making us less strangers in this land'.

Formal education and information programs, often run by governments as public consultation, are limited by working in a single direction and avoiding real 'hand-on' participation. An analogy: when I was growing up in the fifties and sixties our family's fridge, like most I sampled from, contained the most basic cheeses, Kraft and tasty cheese. Today, everyone selects from a wider variety of cheeses. This remarkable change didn't result from a government 'palate education' program but rather from increasing cultural diversity and a wider availability of diverse cheese products. The same could be said of heritage. The community doesn't need formal education; it needs increased opportunities for discovery. Projects like that proposed by Dr Powell (and described above) could enable people to learn for themselves by exploring the cultural landscape.

Such dilemmas won't be easily solved, nor should they be. My views are based on personal and political perspectives that may not be widely shared. One perspective is that many of us seek to be agents of change, seeking to change how people relate to their environment (or parts of it), not just technocrats. Discussion of such fundamental motivations is needed if we want to build new forms of practice.

The key questions are:
- what is successful landscape conservation practice?
- what are the ends that we are seeking to achieve?
- how can we develop a form of practice that will provide us with the means to achieve these ends?

Difficult questions indeed, and like many of the issues raised in this paper, relate to the whole field of practice in conserving the cultural environment.

From the discussions at the Conference it is clear that while we feel some confidence about identifying and assessing the cultural significance of landscape, we don't feel that there is the political support we need to enable such landscapes to be conserved.

To develop the political will I believe we need to build forms of practice that encourage the wider community to learn about and identify for themselves the sorts of values each of us attaches to familiar places and to experience the process of getting to know and to care about a previously unknown place. I believe it is this highly experiential and hands-on approach that excites us all to keep being involved in conservation and I believe we need to share some of these joys with the rest of the community.

First we need to evaluate some of the small steps in community-based assessment already taken and then explore some other approaches. We shouldn't expect one answer nor a simple answer but rather be creative in how we could build new approaches to all aspects of landscape practice; from identification to publicity. In doing this we must to consider Alison Blake's notion of building an emancipatory practice of conservation.

This isn't the place to start that evaluation but I'd like to offer some comments about several projects and proposals. One I am very familiar with is a proposal to explore community-based landscape assessment techniques in the Upper Yarra Valley and Dandenong Ranges region. Funding has been sought (but not obtained) from the AHC. Proposed at least ten years ago as part of the original research program for the first Regional Strategy Plan, it was rejected due to difficulties of method, cost and timing, combined with a concern that it mightn't provide the data the planners needed. Instead, a sophisticated analysis of the region's landscape elements provided good landscape management advice for the Plan. Community input was sought through several public meetings but the information gained was difficult to integrate with the other data.

The proposal is based on the USDA Natural Resources Program as it provides the opportunity for a community to be involved all the steps of a planning process, not just as a source of data for professional analysis. The most important advantage of this method may not be in identifying differences between the perceptions of local people and professionals but rather in providing results that are more meaningful and tangible to local decision-makers because they are the expressed preferences of local people rather than those of the outside professional.

A quite different project was that started by the University of Melbourne in the Macedon region after the Ash Wednesday bushfires. In this community the rebuilding process was substantially run by local people, providing an unusual opportunity to investigate which features residents felt best conveyed the sense of place. Landscape perception techniques were used; residents independently photographing preferred landscape features, combined with three processes of sorting, rating and ranking photographs and slides provided by the researchers. Protection of the identified features was
advocated by researchers but it was recognised that for detailed planning and design more specific work is needed. While the landscape perception techniques didn’t provide a community-directed project, the overall rebuilding work did.

Secondly, we need to give the community other opportunities to understand landscape more broadly. Dr Powell’s proposals should be revived and given funding support. The Victorian National Trust’s proposal for an ‘image and soundscape’ presenting natural and cultural landscapes is equally innovative and combined with references such as Winty Calder’s ‘Beyond the view’ could also attract the interest of schools. No doubt there are many other ideas.

Thirdly, we need to start talking with the ‘green’ environment movement to find the common ground. In this paper I have outlined some of the reasons why we would benefit from such discussions. Chris Pratten’s talk highlighted an essential reason to create these links. If we are to keep some of the vernacular landscapes we value we need the skills of those who have skills in managing the natural components of such places.

Finally, we need to keep writing, clarifying and debating the notion of landscape; especially relating outwards to the wider community of interested people, not just within our own small circles.

REFERENCES

1. Certainly experts and notable figures are frequently used in environmental and other campaigns to legitimise and add authority to the ‘message’, but frequently to help build mass support rather than influence the decision-makers.

2. A process of monitoring the ‘State of the Environment’ has now started in some States and should provide some assessment of the effectiveness of government policy and action; as far as I know Victoria is the only State proposing to report on the cultural environment, probably in 1990.


8. Following comments at the Conference I have included the work done at Mt Macedon by the University of Melbourne.


14. Interestingly the published analysis focused on comparing the differences between the perceptions of Mt Macedon residents and the Macedon residents and does not examine whether there were substantial differences between the places photographed independently by residents and the photographs created by researchers for ranking.

15. Image and soundscape - a presentation of slides and sounds of the place, using high quality images, and without any ‘voice-over. Used very successfully in Victoria as part of the debate on East Gippsland forests. In its many public screenings it continues to attract good audiences.