

Close Cousins Consider Landscapes: Comparative Notes on Cultural Landscape Work in Australia and the United States

“**A** Sunburnt Country,” “The Lucky Country,” “Tjukurpa” (Aboriginal traditional law), “My Extended Family”—these are some of the ways Australians describe their land, and their relationship with the land. Examples of Australian cultural landscapes range from rural pastoral areas such as Wingecarribee Shire, extensive desert landscapes such as Mungo National Park, to well known cultural symbols such as Sydney Harbour Bridge. Australia and the USA are close cousins by virtue of similar geographic scales and colonial histories. While cultural landscape issues in Australia are very similar to those in the USA, variations in the natural and cultural environment give cultural landscapes a different texture.

This paper is based on research completed during a six-month stay in southeastern Australia during 1996. I offer here comparative notes rather than a definitive or comprehensive evaluation. While I mention indigenous values and places, I leave a fuller discussion to Aboriginal writers who can provide an indigenous perspective (Tjamiwa 1992; Bates and Witter 1992).

Cultural Landscape Work in Australia

As in the USA, agencies and organizations from the local to the national level are involved in landscape preservation efforts. Ken Taylor and Peter James provide excellent summaries of the Australian heritage conservation (historic preservation) system and Australia–USA comparisons

(Taylor 1996; James 1996). Often, the definition of what a cultural landscape is and is not—whether a certain landscape is acknowledged to have cultural associations—influences the degree of threat to significant landscape resources, and the degree to which cultural landscape resources are preserved. This is sometimes the case within national parks, where large-scale development pressures may not be present, but where lack of recognition of cultural associations may threaten cultural landscape integrity.

Some shire (county) councils focus conservation efforts on prominent town and landscape structures, while others, such as Wingecarribee Shire, consider heritage at a landscape scale. Wingecarribee Shire, located in east-central New South

Wales, consists of small-scale dairy farms within larger-scale pastoral properties, which, in turn, have been overlain onto the indigenous landscape (“Wingecarribee” is an Aboriginal word meaning “water to the west”). Small patches of semi-tropical rainforest, present on a large scale prior to European settlement, remain on hill tops. The shire council funded a “Historic Cultural Landscape Assessment and Evaluation” report (Landscan Pty. Ltd. and Taylor 1991) which identifies key historic landscape units, and key features within the units, for specific preservation attention (Taylor and Tallents 1996). By recognizing the shire as a cultural landscape, larger-scale changes such as residential subdivisions can be kept out of sensitive historic areas, in addition to smaller-scale historic features being preserved.

In Australia, responsibility for developing and implementing conservation policy lies at the state level. Australian planning is based on the British planning system and so heritage protection is often undertaken through planning legislation (Taylor 1996, personal communication). Lanyon Homestead, near Canberra (Figure 1), was the first landscape listed on the Register of the National Estate for its historic and social values rather than for scenic values. Listing saved Lanyon from being engulfed by suburban development (Taylor 1996, personal communication). The Australian Alps Liaison Committee is an example of national

park agencies from three states joining to address management issues within the Australian Alps parks. The committee funded a cultural landscape report which outlines the analysis and evaluation process and offers guidelines for specific elements such as native and exotic plants (Lennon and Matthews 1996). Recognizing the Australian Alps as a cultural landscape is a contentious issue. High-country graziers support preservation of both homestead complexes and grazing in traditional grazing areas, while nature conservationists support removal of all evidence of European historical activity. While grazing has been banned within the parks, some of the cattlemen’s huts remain (Egloff and Fingleton 1994).

Federal departments are also involved. The Australian Heritage Commission, which manages the Register of the National Estate and has an advisory relationship with the states, has developed standards and criteria for cultural landscape nominations. The Australian World Heritage Unit administers the eleven existing World Heritage properties, which include Uluru–Kata Tjuta (formerly known as Ayer’s Rock and the Olgas) and Kakadu national parks. The Sydney Opera House in its landscape setting (Figure 2) is currently being evaluated for World Heritage Status and, if listed, would be the first in Australia to be nominated for primarily European cultural values (Read 1996, personal communication).



Figure 1. Lanyon homestead, Australian Capital Territory

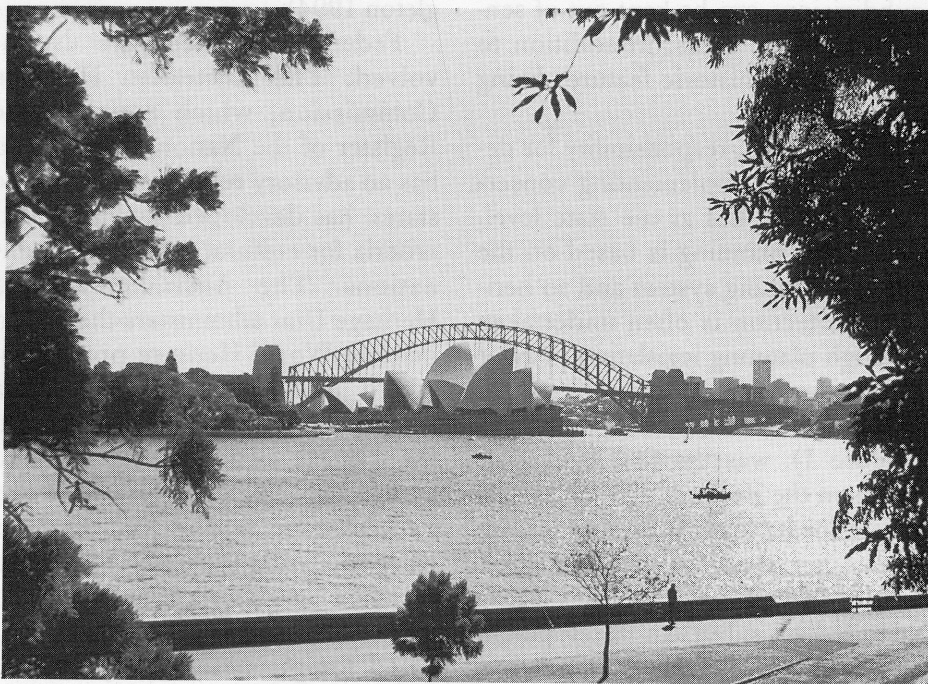


Figure 2. Sydney Harbour, with bridge and opera house, Sydney, New South Wales

The two countries share successes in the recognition of cultural landscapes and the development of specific policies within some resource management agencies; common concerns, such as the need for landscape theme studies; and the gap between professional preservation language and community members' ways of expressing what is significant to them. In Australia, cultural landscapes are one kind of heritage place which can be nominated to the Register of the National Estate, in contrast to the U.S. National Register, where cultural landscapes can be nominated as sites, districts, multiple properties, or traditional cultural properties.

Along with focusing on European history, the 1988 Australian bicentennial also brought new attention to the dispossession of Aboriginal people. Related to this, a major issue within cultural landscape discussions in Australia is the need for cultural landscape studies to be collaborative efforts between communities (indigenous, settler, and migrant communities) and heritage professionals. This was identified as the overriding issue by participants at the 1996 Australia International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS) Cultural Landscapes Conference. Other areas of concern include: (1) focusing on preserving special landscapes within protected areas versus preserving historic elements throughout whole regions (Jacques 1995); (2) the inclusion and accurate representation of women's heritage

(Anderson 1993; Bickford 1992); and (3) whether professional heritage activity is the latest version of imperialism (Sullivan 1993).

Cultural Landscapes as a Vehicle for Sustainability

The application of indigenous traditional ecological knowledge to the management of landscapes in protected areas is an excellent example of promoting sustainability by recognizing a landscape as cultural. Australia was not a vast wilderness when European settlers arrived: it was a vast indigenous cultural landscape, where flora and fauna co-evolved with indigenous people for over 40,000 years (Lennon and Matthews 1996). No longer are Aboriginal sites additional dots on a map to be considered for heritage protection; rather, the Aboriginal landscape, with its complex relationships of tribal areas, nodes, and linkages (du Cros 1996; Kneebone 1996) becomes the map itself.

Near Mungo National Park in western New South Wales (Figure 3), evidence of Aboriginal occupation dating back 30,000 or more years was found in 1969 when archeologists found Aboriginal skeletal remains in this area. Mungo also contains evidence of European pastoral activity (Australian Heritage Commission 1980). The Mungo cultural landscape has strong ethnographic significance for contemporary Aboriginal people for whom the archeological findings have major implications for their place in con-



Figure 3. Mungo National Park, New South Wales

temporary Australian society.

Bob Randall, an indigenous Australian who grew up in Uluru country, describes “country” (the land and all living things) as his family (Randall 1990). In her recent book *Nourishing Terrains*, which is based on many years studying with Aboriginal people, Deborah Bird Rose characterizes the indigenous landscape, or “country,” as “a place that gives and receives life.... People talk about country in the same way that they would talk about a person: they speak to country ... worry about country ... and long for country.... Country is a living entity, with a consciousness, and a will toward life.” (Rose 1996, 7)

One of the major ways to care for country is to burn it. The European

term “fire-stick farming” has been given to Aboriginal peoples’ conscious and deliberate use of fire to promote the well-being of particular types of ecosystems (Jones 1973). In contrast to large, intense bushfires, traditional burning (by women and men) involves a series of low-intensity fires lit to create “a fine-scaled mosaic of vegetation of different ages” (DEST 1994, 29). For Aboriginal people, country that has been burned in the right way at the right time is referred to as clean and cared for, as opposed to unburned country, which is wild and unclean. Effective burning depends on detailed knowledge of soils, water sources, wind patterns, vegetation growth patterns, and animal behavior, and plays a role in maintaining social re-

lationships, as when used in ceremonies. For example, rings of over-mature inedible spinifex grass need to be burned to allow other edible plants to take hold, while the low-intensity fire doesn't harm small mammals who take cover in their underground burrows (Breedon 1994). Research has shown that fire-stick farming keeps flora and fauna healthy and diverse, and that it is a sustainable practice (Rose 1996; Lewis 1992).

The landscape of large eucalyptus trees scattered within open grassland, which early settlers mistook to be Australia's "natural" ideal pastoral landscape, is actually the result of thousands of years of active Aboriginal land management. While Aboriginal people also feel ambivalent about fire and fear its destructive powers, they traditionally took the approach of working with fire rather than suppressing it, as European settlers have often done.

Uluru-Kata Tjuta National Park, located in the Northern Territory, is jointly managed between the Anangu people and the Australian Nature Conservation Agency. Uluru-Kata Tjuta has recently been renominated for World Heritage status "as a cultural landscape reflecting 'specific techniques of sustainable land-use' and 'a specific spiritual relation to nature' that can 'contribute to modern techniques of sustainable land-use' and 'support biological diversity'" (DEST 1994, 21). "Specific techniques of sustainable land-use" include fire-stick farming along with

cleaning out water holes and other traditional practices (DEST 1994, 22). According to the World Heritage Renomination, patch burning, which is modeled after traditional fire-stick farming, "has been encouraged by Park management since 1985.... Major wildfires in the summer of 1990-91 ... started outside the Park but were contained with little effort once they ran into the patch-burns in the Park" (DEST 1994, 30). Not only does traditional burning enhance ecological health of the land, it also sustains the close relationship between Anangu people and their country. By acknowledging the role of traditional land management practices, Anangu country is recognized as a cultural landscape, and the preservation of both cultural and natural landscape systems is enhanced.

Conclusion

Getting to know Australian cultural landscapes and those concerned with their preservation reminded me of some basic ideas which I carry back to my U.S. National Park Service work. First, we must continue to question our existing historic preservation system and underlying patterns of thinking in order to broaden and refine what historic preservation means. Continuing efforts to collaborate with communities and reinforcing women's perspectives are two ways we can do this. Second, the recognition of an area as having cultural values and associations is the first step in cultural landscape preservation.

And third, we need to keep in mind, as we proceed with inventories and analyses, that symbolic meanings of the landscape, and emotional associations with the landscape, play a large role in how and why people have modified their environment

(Taylor 1992). A quintessentially Australian example is people's relationship with fire as a landscape-changing force, from an emotional response of fear and avoidance to a relationship with fire as a tool to clean and care for the land.

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