

## 40 Sheds and 40 kilometres: a heritage tourism project

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*A project recording an image based interpretive educational program informing regional communities of the potential for preservation of important historical farm buildings has stimulated a great deal of interest. This paper reflects on the project which identified a distinctive series of iconic farm buildings along the New South Wales Pacific Highway for their heritage value and developed a tourist route to promote them to visitors and residents.*

*The 40 km section of the Pacific Highway from Maclean to Grafton is quite rare. There are well over 40 farm sheds visible from the Highway, most just metres away from passing traffic. While few sheds are individually of high heritage value, as a collection of sheds and in the particular landscape they are located, they provide an opportunity to recognise, interpret and manage a significant cultural resource.*

*In this densely settled and diverse cultural setting visitors as well as residents are engaged by the humble 'rude' shed. The materials are diverse. While rough sawn hardwood and corrugated iron predominates there is evidence of brick, block, fibro, sawn timber, wire mesh and more. The sheds are the link to a formal regional identity through rural pursuits and diverse collaborative endeavours.*

*The project documents over 40 farm buildings through photography, drawing, story telling and design dimensions underpinned by research on the history of the buildings, through interviews with property owners and extensive recording of oral history of district settlers describing their experience of primary production; develops interpretive material for touring exhibitions; and prepares print collateral through partnerships with numerous individuals and groups. The project offers preliminary material for further research and community action.*

An innovative project identifying a series of farm buildings along the Pacific Highway in northern NSW for their heritage value was undertaken in 2000. An interpretive educational program to inform regional communities of the potential for preservation and tourism of these important historical buildings was conducted through a partnership between the Northern Rivers Regional Cultural Tourism Organisation and Southern Cross University's School of Tourism and Hospitality Management. A variety of local stakeholders shared ways to best represent this important aspect of the regional heritage.

The project identified the appeal to visitors of the densely settled diverse agricultural area. Residents and visitors regard the landscape as authentic Australian. The humble 'rude' shed is the built element that links the human activity and the landscape. The sheds' materials are diverse. While rough hewn hardwood and corrugated iron predominates there are also stones or brick, block, fibro, sawn timber, wire mesh and more.

In the 40km between Grafton (south) and Maclean (to the north) in Northern Rivers NSW one of the nation's major highways runs beside one of the nation's widest rivers (and the one that delivers the most water to the ocean). It's a landscape through which tourists travel all year. The nation's present preoccupation with coming to terms with its identity, provides a timely framework to define 'cultural tourism'. Once we know who we are, and what constitutes Australian culture, we will be better placed to enjoy it ourselves and invite others to share it.

The project explored how cultural mapping processes can inform appropriate development and delivery of cultural tourism experiences for the host community and the visitor.

## **Cultural tourism**

The culture of the region is no longer the exclusive domain of the residents. It is now, more than ever, shared through tourism with visitors. This does, however, raise the risk of confusing what belongs to 'culture' and what belongs to 'tourism'. The notion of place being affected by tourism development (Hall and Jenkins 1995) is under scrutiny in the Clarence area. What is observed is the tension demonstrated by the organisation of history in tourism settings and how it can transform the cultural and historical life of host communities. The process of cultural mapping is used to investigate the trappings of a discrete group of people in their landscape. By doing so, a cultural tourism product, if desired, can be generated. The expectations of host and guest are thus transformed. By creating cultural tourism products the sense of place for each is altered.

Definitions of culture include the relationship of people to their past - familial, communal and societal; their built and natural heritage, their spirituality, rituals and ceremonies; their art form practices and celebrations; political evolution and lifestyle choices. Cultural tourism as a distinctive sector of mainstream tourism activity is attractive to regional communities. The opportunity to ground the visitor experience in the daily life of host communities provides considerable management and marketing challenges to stakeholders, including local government, state agencies (like the RTA, Tourism NSW), specific community cultural groups (like museums and historical societies) and landholders as they come to terms with the attendant increased visitation.

Cultural tourism is the art of participating in another culture, of relating to people and places that have a strong sense of their own identity. It is an approach to tourism that gives tourists credit for intelligence, and promises them some depth of experience and real-life layering that can be explored on many levels' (Lips 1990).

The notion formulated by Wood (1993) that 'community, the custodians of the content of Australian tourism, must be enabled to participate in tourism by forming its content' is at the base of some current research into regional community cultural development and cultural tourism. The 40 Sheds project exemplifies the fundamental considerations posed by this multidisciplinary research. Currently the sheds provide a passive 'drive by' experience. To establish greater interaction between landholders

and visitors considerable heritage tourism product development needs to be undertaken.

A criterion based upon *what* is visited (monuments and artistic events) is being replaced by one which deals with *how* they are visited (Wood 1992). This shift reflects a move from cultural tourism being represented as a way of protecting monuments *from* tourists, 'whereas now we tend to speak of using cultural tourism's educative role to teach people to respect them and its economic power to nurture them' (Wood 1992:4). This contextual framework is central to definitions represented in the literature.

Cultural assets in Australia are defined by the *Australian Heritage Commission Act 1975* as consisting of 'those places, being components of the natural environment of Australia, or the cultural environment of Australia, that have aesthetic, historic, scientific or social significance or other special value for future generations as well as for the present community' (cited in Brokensha and Guldberg 1992:67).

'Cultural tourism involves customised excursions into other cultures and places to learn about their people, lifestyle, heritage and arts in an informed way that genuinely represents those cultures and their historical contexts' (Craik 1995:6). Cultural tourism is having to do with the human environment. This is where culture signifies a whole range of human creation, custom, heritage and activity. Cultural tourism offers a special dynamic of its own. It allows for linkages with substantial elements of the human condition, the joys and hopes, not only for travellers (tourism visitor/guest) but also for host communities. It means enrichment. It offers opportunities for reflection for host and guest. It can improve the quality of life of both parties. It encourages cultural exposure in a wider context and can be a cause for celebration.

Cultural tourism is about the *ways of a place* - essentially people would be cultural tourists to *do what locals do*. They wish to experience the significant bits of life of the host community. They want to go home with *a story*. This story telling element has been central to travel since time immemorial; so culture and tourism are not strangers to one another; it is not a new phenomenon. The collaborative nature of cultural tourism is in fact the *content* of tourism. The project allowed for initial contact with local social historians and embryonic stories for later inclusion in tourism material.

Now there is a tourism product called cultural tourism it can act as a catalyst for broader cultural development. It can provide increased employment and training opportunities in labour intensive industries of the arts, heritage, conservation and tourism. It can generate pride in communities' built and natural environments. It can activate infrastructure and amenities for host communities. It can encourage partnerships and packages in a commercial sense through tours, conventions, events and meetings. It can encourage the length of stay of visitors to a community and increase income for a cross section of that community. It encourages the partnerships between the public and private sector. It energises the volunteer sector.

Cultural tourists generally require an experience: an authentic, hands-on, peace-and-quiet, interactive-exchange, skills-development, spiritual, responsible, safe and unique type of experience. The marketing of such a cultural experience can be challenging and offers opportunities for partnerships with other specialised providers and

technologies. The sharing of information, the making of effective connections and entrepreneurship are strategies which can be embraced by existing or new tourism providers.

The VFR market attracts 30% of the annual visitation to the Northern Rivers region. With people wanting to do what locals do, those associated with the sheds as a tourism product have to encourage a commitment from landholders. Such agreements will ensure that everyone understands the mutual benefits from this *new tourism*. These host communities need to be well informed and an association with experienced distributors of tourism product needs to be established. They will then introduce the most effective tourism product to their networks. Understanding markets like the 'grey nomads' who tour by car and are ready to hear a story, or the WHOPPIES (wealthy, healthy, older people!) may be appropriate.

## **Cultural Mapping**

The marketing of the cultural experience as a tourism product requires some considerable knowledge and information about the cultural resources and assets contained within a community. The assessment of the tangible aspects of a community's culture is relatively straightforward. This entails the identification of museums, galleries, distinctive landmarks, landscapes and industries. It is however the intangibles associated with community culture, the *how and why we do and have done things around here* that gives identity and resonance to that culture.

Documenting and assessing the diversity of knowledge a community has of itself, is termed *cultural mapping*. It is a process that provides an understanding 'of how people are experiencing their place and culture' (Grogan and Mercer 1995:74). The process of cultural mapping is generally needs driven from within a community and can serve as a community building tool by alleviating unemployment, and developing tourism and other creative cultural and social activities. Cultural mapping defines a community in terms of its social and economic values; it records, preserves and allows development of those values in new and creative ways.

The 40 Sheds and 40 Kilometres Heritage Tourism Project engaged in a cultural mapping exercise by developing an educational program that identified and documented a collection of farm buildings. The project further interpreted the buildings using photo-documentation and interpretation derived from the reminiscences of community members who had either owned, worked with or grew up on the farms of the lower Clarence River. The exercise revealed an array of comments related to the buildings. Some representative feelings and attitudes:

- There was a sense of reverence expressed for the past as many of the sheds are regarded as direct links to the pioneering families of the area.
- They (the buildings) appeared to epitomise the lost sense of social cohesiveness in this agricultural setting. Clearly they symbolised a time of relative prosperity and importance in a largely agrarian society.
- From the community at large, who had no direct connection to the buildings came a sense of value that was related to the buildings as representing authentic links to the past and to a somewhat less complicated world.

When asked what image could be assigned to symbolise this locality, most people thought that the local farming landscape and the river were the two most representative. It was interesting to note that most of the older people referred to the river as a source of benefit despite the ever-present threat of flood. It was often referred to as 'the road in the old days'. Many of the old homesteads were orientated towards the river much as a house will face the street. The highway on the other hand was referred to as a disruptive influence, having various realignments which caused inconvenient subdivisions of farms and ever-increasing traffic which inevitably made many properties unmanageable as dairy farms. The road was viewed as one of the main contributing elements to irreversible change, both from the perspective of altering farming activities away from the traditional and delivering a new and unfamiliar population to the locality.

These views introduce the issue of interpretation of the values expressed within the cultural mapping exercise. This is in relation to the collection of buildings as an expression of a cultural tourism product. Fundamental to this product is the notion of the shed as the linkage between human endeavor and landscape. It is this linkage combined with long held local traditions and activities that create within a community, its sense of place. Uptis (cited in Uzzell 1989:154) suggests that it is more than simply a 'physical location'. This sense, developed over time is an expression of attitude and personality at a community level. It draws on the success and adversity experienced by the community and so develops as a sense of local identity.

So the interpretation of values that will accurately reflect the sense of place, of which the sheds are a major element, needs to be carefully considered from the perspective of a sensitivity to cultural ownership and the imposition of intellectual and personal values held by the interpreter. To undervalue cultural ownership and local interests is to miss out on the full support and good will of the community, thereby diminishing the richness and effectiveness of the interpretation program. Brokensha and Guldberg (1992: 172) concur with this notion and suggest that 'local people are a huge but largely under-utilized cultural resource.' Indeed a tourism product based on the interpretation of a community's local heritage environment, complete with the diverse and special characteristics, is as Binks remarks '(much more) likely to be self-sustaining long after the fashion for a more ephemeral tourist activity has passed' (cited in Uzzell 1989:193).

## **Methodology**

The project's objectives required that research be conducted into the background and history of a distinctive series of aging farm buildings. The research into the buildings was limited to their social and industrial context at a local level and did not attempt to formally define or assess the buildings in terms of their technical and aesthetic significance. This process may be seen as the first step in the production of a formal statement of significance and relates directly to the initial stage of the NSW Heritage Management System, that of an investigation of significance.

The research undertaken was essentially primary by nature, however secondary research was conducted. The primary research took several forms. First, consultation at the local government level was undertaken with the relevant Heritage Committees.

The purpose of this consultation was twofold, firstly to determine if any previous studies had taken place relating to the 'Sheds' and secondly whether the Committees possessed and were willing to share any useful information.

Second, information and comment were solicited from the public at large using a discrete public relations campaign that alerted the public, through the electronic and print media, to the existence of the project and its research requirements. This approach provided the public with the opportunity to directly access the researcher through a face to face meeting and provided opportunities for future contact. Further to this, the researcher was able to gauge the level of awareness and interest in the subject with respect to the issues of preservation and local identity.

Third, interviews were conducted with key personnel who were reputed to have a keen interest in the subject or who had some specialist knowledge of the subject. Most mature communities that possess a somewhat parochial view of themselves will more than likely have individuals who are the self-appointed social historians of that community. In this situation it was essential to locate these individuals and gain their cooperation so as to provide an overall view of the subject from a local perspective and to give an indication of long standing family ownership as well as current ownership. This was of great assistance when approaching historical societies as well as the individual owners themselves.

Based on this broader perspective and armed with a reasonably precise overview of the subject, interviews were conducted with property owners, both past and present. Information received from key persons that related to elderly community members who have specialist knowledge and experience of the subjects was very helpful. Contact with these individuals who were in some cases, residents of retirement homes, was made much easier when made with a referral or introduction from a familiar source. These individuals must be regarded as a highly valuable source of information and particularly in terms of producing an oral history associated with the subject. This issue should perhaps be regarded with some urgency given the situation of the individuals and their advanced years.

Secondary research material was found in the archives of the historical societies at Maclean and Grafton. Generally the information gathered from this source related to the regional history and activities associated with the agricultural nature of the subject, although not specific to individual buildings or properties. Information of this kind may have well been found within the documentation relating to particular proprietor families. Another source of agricultural activity relating to the buildings could be found in the records of the various agricultural show societies.

## **Project Outputs**

The initiative included a variety of approaches to documenting over 40 farm buildings on either side of the Pacific Highway between Maclean and Grafton in the Clarence Valley by award winning photographer Peter Derrett. An exhibition of black and white photographs was conducted between February 28 - April 8, 2001 at the Grafton Regional Art Gallery. The exhibition will later be available to the Southern Cross University Art Museum for display and to tour nationally.

Research was undertaken to establish aspects of the history of the buildings; interviews were conducted with property owners and oral history of district and primary production has documented contact with those currently living on the land on which these buildings are sited. Some of the material collected is represented in the print documents generated by the project.

An A3 tourism route flier was created for distribution through the Tourism Centres in South Grafton and Ferry Park, Maclean, operated by the Clarence Valley Tourist Association. A disk of the material is available to the Tourism Manager for increasing the number of fliers in circulation. The simple driving tour guide was well received and will form the basis of any future promotional material.

Further research was included in a 2001 calendar created to celebrate the people and the places in the focus area. This been distributed to local government, tourism outlets, museums and community outlets to indicate that there are numerous options for further print documentation. A glossy calendar is to be produced for 2002, ensuring the longevity of image and story-telling.

The cultural mapping exercise benefited from considerable media attention which is ongoing regionally. Radio and print media demonstrated an interest, conducting interviews and printing stories. The University press also printed stories. It is anticipated that the local stakeholders will have sufficient material with which to pursue a variety of heritage and tourism options.

A comprehensive report has been compiled of heritage tourism product development ideas generated by university students during a field trip and intensive primary and secondary research (Special Interest Tourism 2000). Guest speakers and visits to sites, museums, galleries and tourism offices underpinned the work undertaken by the students.

The Maclean and Pristine Waters Councils' Heritage Adviser was part of an advisory panel which guided the development and execution of the project. Wendy Laird, Ian Oelrichs from Break of Day Investments and the Nature Tourism Taskforce and Peter Wynn Moylan from the Northern Rivers Regional Cultural Tourism Organisation worked closely with the project manager, Ros Derrett. Justin St Vincent Welch was engaged as Researcher and Susi Muddiman, the Director of the Grafton Regional Gallery, was an active participant in the process.

A final document outlining inputs and outputs to the project was delivered to the NSW Heritage Office. The financial investment made by them has provided a significant impetus to re-examining an important aspect of the region's heritage. Substantial in-kind support was contributed by individuals, professionals and community groups.

## **Observations**

The public appeal for community input served as a tool to gather information and also to create awareness of the project and its potential outcomes. In the first instance this strategy did not yield the richness of anecdote or remembrance that was hoped for. A few useful contacts were made and it may have even created some defensive reaction

amongst some of the shed owners because of their preconceived view of heritage listing. Most property owners interviewed expressed some concern at the prospect of the possibility of their buildings being listed even though they also professed an interest in the conservation of the structures that they regarded as being representative of a more significant time. The strategy did however succeed in creating considerable awareness of and interest in the project across a wide section of the community.

The informal interviews on the other hand were very successful as a research tool, considering the requirement for assessment of the social significance attached to these buildings by the local community. The level of significance would be difficult to determine without allowing for personal interpretation by members of the community. The interview also allowed for clarification of the project's position on the issue of inclusion into the NSW Heritage Database. Cross-referencing of stories was also made possible by interviewing different people about the same subject. This also provided opportunities for referral to new contacts and sources of information. An additional advantage of this form of primary research was the opportunity to compile a reference list of knowledgeable and helpful individuals that may be used as a resource for future studies and assessments

## **Opportunities Identified**

While all formal project objectives were achieved, numerous opportunities were identified during its development and completion. These actions are to:

- Prepare an assessment of the heritage significance of the built landscape for inclusion in the NSW Heritage database.
- Develop destination promotion strategies as suggested in student reports which will be useful to the Heritage Advisory agencies in the three local government areas.
- Apply for *Visions of Australia* funding to travel the Sheds Photographic Exhibition and Texts nationally to inland centres.
- Prepare academic papers from the research for publication and presentation at appropriate conferences.
- Design riverside heritage interpretation at designated picnic spots; further research and photographic imagery could be employed.
- Create detailed heritage inventories of the sheds for each of the local government areas. The existing proforma should be used. Other sheds have been found in the district and require inclusion in any comprehensive study. Individuals have expressed interest in inclusion of their properties in a register.
- Compile a register for film makers (a substantial cultural sector on the Northern Rivers) who regularly seek authentic rural locations for film productions.



- Employ GIS (maybe a project with SCU) to document the location and scale of these buildings
- Compile oral histories in conjunction with local museums and historical societies. Individuals and families associated with the construction and maintenance of the farm buildings are willing to share stories.
- Develop community festivals or specific ‘shed’ events.
- Develop appropriate signage (and interpretation) to identify significant sheds whose owners are happy to allow public access.
- Prepare a detailed map locating each of the sheds.
- Develop a scenic drive to include the established Squatters Rest Museum (at Tucabia). The Pacific Highway route is a possibility for enterprising tour operators. The Museum accommodates buses for visits and food and beverage; so packages could be developed.
- Conduct workshops for property owners along the route to establish interest in a heritage tourism route. Some owners have expressed interest in knowing more about how to realise on the potential of their buildings. For example, the development of a ‘living’ museum representing life on a 1890s-1900s dairy farm.
- Develop a tourism agency managed survey of the visitors’ ‘ favourite shed’. A flier could be picked up at one end of the route and the visitor responses could be eligible for a prize.
- Develop further collateral including postcards, a book of the images and text supplied by recognized authorities in landscape architecture, heritage management and tourism and other merchandising.

## Conclusion

This project allowed for a series of indicative processes to establish the value that the public at large places on a heritage environment of agricultural buildings; and how the local people feel about the sheds as a tangible representation of their culture. This was a significant aspect of the response by interviewees to this project. They considered that this element of their culture would soon be lost to them. They felt increasing pressure to either share their heritage with visitors or abandon the sheds to decay or to adapt them for alternative agricultural purposes. The sheds are on the brink of disappearing from the landscape; in fact during the project some actually did. This twilight zone of absorbing heritage into a tourism framework highlights the issues of commodification to people unfamiliar with mainstream tourism activity. The research recognised the importance of the lifestyle and landscape choices residents have made over time and how these can be teased out for story telling, documenting change in a landscape and challenges to land use.

The uniqueness of a series of sheds (in any condition) in a discrete location is identified as extremely marketable. Tourism could provide the framework for some

landholders on the Pacific Highway between Grafton and Maclean to conserve the sheds. The age and condition of some sheds make them extremely attractive to the drive by tourism market. While few sheds are individually of high heritage value, as a collection of sheds and in the particular landscape they are located, they provide an opportunity to recognise, interpret and manage a significant cultural resource.

## Acknowledgement

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