

## **Conclusion**

*The following paper was presented by Dr Sandy Blair as Australia's representative on the ISC for Cultural Itineraries at the International Congress of ICOMOS, June 21-23 2001 at Pamplona, Navarra, Spain. The Congress theme was 'Cultural Routes and Intangible Heritage within a universal context'.*

### **Making Tracks: key issues about the heritage of Australian routes and journeys\***

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This paper discusses some of the key features of routes in Australia, in particular the relationship between understanding the significance of routes and the connection to the Australian landscape. The paper is very much informed by the Australia ICOMOS national conference held in Alice Springs 23-27 May 2001 and it presents some of the key outcomes of the conference.

The purpose of the conference was to reach a better understanding of the cultural routes of the Australian and Asia-Pacific region as a contribution to broader research in the global context. The conference mainly focussed on Australia and was aimed at the range of people who are involved with heritage places – owners, managers, researchers, interpreters and visitors. However, overseas delegates presented case studies from Canada, the Middle East, Malaysia, South Africa and the United States and Australian delegates included examples from Vietnam, Nepal and China.

The conference was focussed around a number of key issues or topics which participants were invited to address in their paper. These were:

1. The relationship between routes and the natural environment, including impacts on the natural environment;
2. Routes and cultural identity, the links between cultures and the impact of routes on cultural practices and territory;
3. The appreciation and understanding of land and culture through routes;
4. The distinctiveness of cultural routes in Australia compared with other countries, and links between Australia and the Asia-Pacific region; and
5. The relevance of cultural routes in today's world – recognition, interpretation and management.

We would like to briefly present the discussion at the conference under each of these issues, and outline the conclusions reached by the conference participants in the plenary session.

#### **Routes and the natural environment**

Australian travel routes often have multiple natural and cultural heritage values that demonstrate the close interrelation of natural and cultural environments and the way in which values are often layered.

Australia is a vast continent, the driest on earth, and one that has always been sparsely populated. Naturally, water has often been a decisive factor for people moving across the continent and in determining lines of travel. There are certain logical lines of travel, and key nodes centred around water sources such as springs, soaks, and the major waterholes on the few inland rivers. These logical lines of travel have an essential layer of cultural significance connected to tens of thousands of years of Aboriginal tradition. The trade and development routes connected with the last two hundred years of non-Indigenous history in the continent, invariably have a close relationship to these well-used Indigenous routes.

One of Australia's most richly layered movement, trade and communication routes is that associated with the mound springs of northern South Australia researched over three decades by Colin Harris (Harris 2001). These unique sources of water have been supremely important to Indigenous and non-Indigenous people. Mound springs are the natural outlets for the pressurised groundwater of the Great Artesian Basin, one of the largest of its kind in the world. They have a lineal alignment because many of them are located in water-bearing aquifers around the margins of the Basin. They are totally unique concentrations of flora and fauna, many critically endangered. With their lineal alignment over hundreds of kilometres and their unfailing supply of drinkable water, they have provided an environmental corridor for successive transport and communication links over time.

The layered natural and cultural values associated with the mound springs can be experienced by travelling along the Oodnadatta track, a famous outback road stretching from Marree to Oodnadatta in the far north of Australia. Some conference participants made this journey, with tour guides from the local Arabunna community, who shared some of their stories and cultural traditions along the route. This journey also traces the routes of early European explorers, and the building of the Central Australian (Ghan) Railway and the Overland Telegraph Line.

The importance of the natural and cultural heritage associated with the springs has been well documented and some important conservation management measures have been put in place over the past two decades (Harris 2001). However a great deal more work needs to be done to recognise and ensure an appropriate balance between conserving all the values associated with these routes, natural, Indigenous and historic.

## **Routes and cultural identity**

Key water sources through inland Australia, along with other important natural features are connected through Aboriginal law – the law that documents the formation of the landscape. Places are related along the travel routes of creation ancestors – the so-called 'Dreaming tracks'. Through this law, and the Dreaming tracks which criss-cross the Australian landscape, Aboriginal groups have established legal and social

responsibilities which have formalised the relationships between groups on a vast geographic scale.

Along the lines of the Dreamtime ancestors' travels, groups traded commodities they could not procure in their own country, they exchanged ideas, components of religious tradition, and they gathered socially from far afield, intermarried and formed extended family and social relationships.

The stories, songs and dances that retell the Dreamtime creation along a line are divided into sections and owned and looked after by groups along the line. The rights to tell parts of the story, or to put together sections of the story along a line, are strictly controlled. The way these parts fit together forms an immensely strong basis for social relationships and exchange.

According to Professor Isabel McBryde's work (1994), the complex long-distance exchange networks which linked – and still link – the Aboriginal societies of Australia are amongst the most extensive in the hunter-gatherer world. McBryde has recorded the archaeology and ethno-history of distributions of axes and axe stone across south-eastern Australia. The exchange networks stretching from the Gulf of Carpentaria in the North to Spencer Gulf in the South are important in an international context. Along these routes, goods such as high quality ochre, sandstone grinding slabs and the narcotic tobacco, pituri, were traded. Other items such as pearl and baler shells were also dispersed into this area and across vast distances.

These routes and networks were also means by which cultural traditions were developed, shared, transferred and transmitted between groups. In the historical period, components of ceremonies have been documented to appear in the north of the continent and be transferred to groups along these routes south and then west across the continent.

The scale of these routes along which people, materials and cultural traditions travelled are vast, and easily comparable to the well-known trade routes such as the Silk Road and Frankincense route. In addition, these routes have a complexity beyond that of a singular linear route. There are in fact many routes, which criss-cross to form a vast net across the continent.

The significance of these complex systems of human communication lies not only in their physical extent, and an anthropological or archaeological significance, but also in continuing social importance to Aboriginal people. At the national level, to this point, these routes and networks have only limited protection. The Commonwealth and State governments are however looking at how they can recognise the national significance of these networks, raise awareness of them in the Australian community, and in a coordinated way improve the protection of associated sites. Aboriginal communities are interested in the social and economic development opportunities that will flow from interpreting these routes and networks to tourists.

## **Understanding of land and culture through routes**

How routes are understood and appreciated depends on who tells the story and how the overall story is recognised and communicated. It is critical that all significant

natural and cultural aspects of the particular route are investigated and that there is a meaningful way to experience parts of the route. The modern travelling of routes is an important part of recognising and understanding their significance. The cognitive and emotional appreciation of routes by the modern traveller depends very much on the way they travelled and on the access of the traveller to appropriate information and presentation.

One reason why cultural routes are attractive to visitors is that they can themselves take a journey, which contributes to their independent, personal exploration and adventure with the experience of the stories and physical remains of the past. This is a unique coordination of experiences, often not available at particular, fully interpreted historic buildings and sites. Travelling on and using cultural routes inevitably contributes to the history of that route and can add a layer of meaning, or can abrade or damage both the tangible and intangible values of the site.

In Australia, cultural routes, especially living cultural Indigenous routes, are often not well understood or appreciated by government. There is a lack of understanding of the full significance and value of routes, and a failure to recognise and take advantage of the increasing sophistication of visitors and their ability to appreciate the interpretive and management subtleties of, for instance, living traditional routes.

Routes are, par excellence, the sum of their parts – a combination of often subtle indicators of past journeys and events – no site in isolation perhaps crossing the threshold for heritage listing – but a combination of sites forming a powerful and significant cultural experience for travellers.

A lovely example of how modern travelling is closely related to developing an understanding of the cultural values of routes is the Ngintaka heritage trail. The Aboriginal communities on the traditional Pitjantjatjara Lands through control of their own tourism business have designed a unique Tjukurpa or ‘Dreaming’ trail. The Pitjantjatjara elders have ensured wide community consultation and anthropological clearance of the route prior to opening sections to the public. The Ngintaka heritage trail is their own expression of how they want to share a living cultural tradition. (James and Brady 2001).

The Pitjantjatjara Aboriginal people of Central Australia are sharing some of their rich cultural heritage with visitors who participate in cultural tours of their country. At Angatja, Lee and Leah Brady take the tourists or ‘students’ along the Ngintaka, Perentie Lizard Trail. The elders, Nganyinytja and her brothers, have determined what information and sites are appropriate to show and share of this important Tjukurpa or Dreaming Songline.

## **Distinctiveness of Australian cultural routes**

The recognition and conservation of cultural routes in Australia raise issue at a national level for a number of reasons. Many travel routes occur on a vast scale, literally traversing Australia and linking our continent to the world beyond. As such, these routes connect places across state borders and through many jurisdictions. Many routes relate strongly to themes that are important to our national identity and

understanding, such as migration, the network of Indigenous law, trade relationships, or exploration, for example.

Heritage routes continue to be vitally important as a national social and economic resource. Routes of historical importance now have an important contemporary role in tourism, such as The Great Ocean Road, the Canning Stock Route, the Birdsville and Strezlecki tracks. We need to have a very pragmatic approach to the future uses of these heritage features. At the least, we need to ensure that uses such as tourism are compatible, sustainable and sensitive to the natural and cultural values found along the way. The Federal body responsible for Australia's heritage, Australian Heritage Commission, has recently released a new framework document *Successful Tourism at Heritage Places*, building on the *ICOMOS International Cultural Tourism Charter*, which pragmatically links tourism codes of practice with heritage conservation philosophy (Australian Heritage Commission 2001)

## **Recognition, interpretation and management**

In Australia, cultural routes are often living traditional routes of indigenous people, and therefore depend for their full appreciation on the generosity, explanation and interpretation of their traditional owners. In many cases, visitors have the opportunity to experience for themselves the tangible and intangible experiences of the route.

Cultural routes are often geographically complex. They do not conform to modern political or land ownership or management boundaries. This has implications for their identification, recognition, conservation and management. Cooperative and/or joint management structures are usually needed for their effective conservation. The continental scale of many Australian routes also means that a national approach, based on cooperation across state boundaries, is essential.

Finally, places along routes invariably contain points that are a convergence of activity and meaning in a vast landscape. Sites will invariably have multiple values and a close interrelationship with the natural environment. Classic examples are: the combination of natural, Indigenous and historic values around the linked series of mound springs in northern South Australia; or the similarly broad values associated with sites along the Telegraph Line. We need to continue to develop integrated approaches to heritage conservation across natural, Indigenous and historic environments and be vigilant that we are not protecting some values at the expense of others.

In conclusion, the conference recognised that there is much more work to do to identify, document and conserve major Australian routes. There was a recognition in particular of the need to work much more closely with the tourism industry. In terms of the CIIC definition, the case studies presented in this paper have potential national, and sometimes universal, significance; they are routes or networks that have been walked by humans often over thousands of years; they have a mix of intangible and tangible values; and they represent a big challenge for conservation and management.

## **References**

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*\*This paper has been published in Historic Environment 16.2, pp.43-46.*