

## Introduction

### **Making Tracks. From point to pathway: the heritage of routes and journeys\***

© Sandy Blair

'Making Tracks', a National Conference of Australia ICOMOS, explored the heritage of travel routes and journeys, with a particular focus on understanding the significance of routes in Australia and their relationship to the Australian landscape.

The conference was held in Alice Springs, from 23 to 27 May 2001. Alice Springs, the 'red centre' of Australia, is a favourite destination for Australian as well as overseas visitors. It is at the centre of many journeys – from Aboriginal dreaming tracks that cross central Australia, to the routes of explorers, the Central Australian (Ghan) Railway and the Overland Telegraph Line. And it's a place where the stories of these journeys intersect. What better place to meet and talk about journeys and routes with long histories and deep meanings, sacred and secular?

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. Specifically, the conference was initiated by Australia ICOMOS as part of its participation in the International Scientific Committee (ISC) on Cultural Itineraries. This ISC is responsible for promoting *the identification, study and enhancement of cultural routes and their significance*. The Committee is interested in cultural routes as whole entities as well as in the significant features that are linked by cultural routes, and recognises that cultural routes contain both tangible and intangible heritage qualities.

The ISC was formed following the recommendations of a conference: *The Canary Islands: a cultural crossroads between continents*, held September 5-8, 1998, San Cristobal de la Laguna (Canary Islands. Spain).

The *Making Tracks* conference at Alice Springs 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. Indigenous people from around Australia participated and several papers had an indigenous theme.

*Making Tracks* defined cultural routes as: a customary or regular line of travel for trade, social to cultural life, utilities, land management, tourism, or other cultural purpose. The conference was designed to develop a broad understanding of Australian cultural routes, including their physical form, extent and patterning in the Australian landscape. As well the conference looked at how routes are made and used, and their diverse social and cultural purposes.

The conference was focused 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.

## Conference Sessions

With a series of ten themed sessions over five days delegates experienced a range of presentations covering the identification, management and interpretation of cultural routes. While most examples were Australian, overseas delegates presented case studies from around the world. As well, posters on cultural routes, personal experiences, and work in progress were contributed, creating an interesting and colourful backdrop in the conference venue. Overall, the conference demonstrated great depth of appreciation of the nature of cultural routes, the complexity of their management and the importance of cooperation across political and administrative boundaries to ensure their long-term protection.

Two sessions, combining papers and field visits were devoted to the theme: *Pathways in the Centre*. The layering of history and meaning along these routes was revealed clearly, raising complex questions about differing values and histories, and the importance of management arrangements that can accommodate this complexity. Because cultural routes typically cross cultural, geographic, community and political boundaries, co-operation and co-ordination in their protection and management is an important priority. Travelling to sites in and around Alice Springs, delegates had the chance to learn about the Eastern Arrente dreaming, and to experience how the landscape continues to contain the story of ancestral journeys.

Another significant theme was *Routes, identity and culture* - in Australia and elsewhere. International examples such as the frankincense route in the Middle East and the Mandela route in South Africa demonstrated the power of the cultural route concept to connect cultural themes and communities across traditional boundaries. The Highway 1 in Vietnam was suggested as a place that represents too many stories, potentially creating great difficulties if it is to be used to interpret Vietnam's complex history. In Penang, understanding the layering of distinctive cultural identities was seen as an essential part of understanding and presenting Penang's history.

At the sessions on *Australian tracks and journeys*, many examples were presented, suggesting that methods of documenting cultural routes are advancing rapidly, and that there is keen interest in the topic from around Australia. Management issues raised included the impact of inappropriate development and risks to sites from uninformed visitors.

Two sessions looked at the travel and tourism as part of the way people experience cultural routes. In *Protecting and managing cultural routes*, new Commonwealth guidelines on heritage tourism were presented. These guidelines - *Successful Tourism at Heritage Places* -

have been designed primarily for tourism operators and heritage managers (copies can be obtained from the AHC or at <http://www.ahc.gov.au/>). An important message from the session was that cultural routes need to be managed to ensure that users understand and show respect for the culture/s that created the route. Stories and story-telling are important ways of conveying a larger cultural message.

In the session on *Promoting and interpreting tracks and journeys*, the nature of the tourist experience was an important focus. Community involvement is a key element for successful promotion and interpretation, and can create positive opportunities for local community development. While cultural routes can be tourism products, care is needed to ensure that this does not conflict with their cultural (and in some cases spiritual) meaning.

For Australia ICOMOS, the conference was a watershed, opening new opportunities for exploration of cultural routes and journeys, and development of guidelines for their protection, management and interpretation.

## **Conference Outcomes**

This issue of *Historic Environment*, edited by Sandy Blair, Sarah-Jane Brazil and Marilyn Truscott, includes only a small selection of the papers presented at the conference. The full set of papers as well as the conference resolutions are available on the Australia ICOMOS website at <http://www.icomos.org/australia>.

The results of the conference informed Australia's input into the meeting of the ISC on Cultural Itineraries held in Pamplona, Navarra, Spain, 21-23 June 2001. An extract from the Australian paper presented as the contribution to the ISC forms the conclusion to this volume.

## **Conference Committee**

Sandy Blair, ACT Conference Convenor and Australia's representative on the ISC on Cultural Itineraries; Sarah-Jane Brazil, Australian Capital Territory (ACT); Hamish Angas, South Australia; Peter Forrest, Northern Territory; Laura Gray, Western Australia; Nicholas Hall, ACT; Amanda Jean, Victoria; Marilyn Truscott, ACT; Meredith Walker, New South Wales.

Thanks are due to Chris Johnston for her summary of conference sessions presented here.

*\*This paper has been published in Historic Environment 16.2, pp. 2-3.*