

The natural and cultural heritage of Australia

Australia's heritage of places and structures is known as the National Estate. It comprises natural areas, Indigenous sites of cultural significance and historic places of all kinds. It includes the most majestic natural areas such as the Prince Regent and Kimberley Area with its deep cut gorges, the giant fossilised coral reef of the Limestone ranges and the humblest cottages such as those in Arthur's Circus in Hobart. The first ever national survey of Australia's heritage of natural, Indigenous and historic places was called the Committee of Inquiry into the National Estate. Its landmark report described the term National Estate as "a brilliant compression of much in little."

Australia's heritage also includes objects and artefacts. Some are to be found in the collections of art galleries, museums of prehistory, historical museums and libraries. A very large number are also distributed widely across the Australian community.

Together this heritage of places and objects helps us to understand what is significant about the land we occupy and the nature of human settlement upon it. It is a priceless inheritance that is available for our present enjoyment. It is our duty to hand it down intact to future generations.

What does this heritage comprise and why should we preserve it?

Australia's natural heritage

Australia's natural heritage comprises many different categories of sites:

- Rainforests, such as Daintree National Park
- Temperate forests, such as the Blue Mountains
- Heath, shrublands, grasslands and herblands, such as the Wimmera, Mallee and south-western Australia

- Plains, such as the Simpson Desert National Park
- Mountains, hills and ridges, such as the Flinders Ranges
- Aeolian landforms, such as Lake Mungo
- River systems, lakes and wetlands, such as Barron Falls in Queensland and the Macquarie Marshes in New South Wales
- Bays, estuaries and marine formations, such as Port Campbell National Park in Victoria
- Islands, such as Fraser Island in Queensland
- Volcanic sites, such as Mt Gambier in South Australia
- Meteor impact sites, such as Wolf Creek in the Kimberley
- Glaciers, such as Table Mountain in Tasmania
- Endangered species habitats, such as the Tanami Wildlife Sanctuary in the Northern Territory
- Caves, such as Wombeyan Cave Reserve in New South Wales; and
- Geological monuments, such as Bungonia Gorge in New South Wales

Many of these natural sites also contain cultural values of significance to Indigenous people.

There are many reasons for preserving this natural heritage.

The most striking, scientifically valuable and beautiful areas must be conserved for future generations and for the world as outstanding examples of Australia's distinctive environment.

Representative examples of each of our various ecosystems should be conserved. They should include plant communities and the breeding grounds and habitats of all indigenous fauna.

The preservation of genetic diversity must be ensured for the:

- Health and stability of natural and near natural systems
- Maintenance of essential life support systems
- Sustainable utilisation of living resources and the ecosystems in which they are found; and
- As yet unknown and untapped agricultural, pharmacological, industrial and other potentials of natural materials

Our finest natural areas should also be preserved for the great recreational opportunities they offer, including relaxation, aesthetic satisfaction and spiritual inspiration.

There are also human-affected landscapes of great beauty and interest that should be preserved for the enjoyment of all people.

Australia's cultural heritage

Australia's Indigenous Estate

Our Indigenous Estate includes:

- Places that have the potential for the study of prehistory, such as Mt William axe quarry and Lake Condah in Victoria
- Sites illustrating living patterns, such as the Ballina middens in New South Wales
- Sites involving creative activities, paintings, engravings and carved trees, such as the Dampier Art site and Burup Peninsula in Western Australia
- Contact sites relating to the history of early relationships between Aboriginal people and Europeans, such as Hermannsburg mission station in the Northern Territory
- Traditional (living, mythological or sacred) sites of significance to Aboriginal people

Australia's Historic Estate

Our Historic Estate includes:

- Historic areas, such as North Adelaide or Fremantle
- Historic towns, such as Beechworth in Victoria
- Precincts and groups of buildings, such as St Vincent Place in Melbourne

- Industrial sites, such as Ravenswood in Queensland
- Grand houses, such as Clarendon Homestead in Tasmania and many small houses of historic significance
- Administrative, commercial and religious buildings, such as Francis Greenway's buildings in Sydney
- Gardens, such as the Royal Botanic Gardens in Melbourne

Australia's heritage of objects and artefacts

Australia's Indigenous Estate includes very early stone tools, weapons, objects used for daily living, traditional dress, woven material and funerary material.

Historic objects and artefacts include great works of art, books, farm and other tools and machinery and objects reflecting the daily lives of Australians from all walks of life.

Preservation of Australia's cultural heritage

There are powerful reasons for preserving the best and most representative examples of each of these components of Australia's Indigenous and Historic Estates.

The most ancient archaeological sites provide vital evidence of the existence and ways of life of humans, and of the settlement of the Australian continent at a date earlier than 40,000 years ago. Archaeological sites illustrate the richness and significance of early Aboriginal society in Australia, comparable to the richness and significance of other centres of early human development, such as the Middle East.

Aboriginal rock engravings and rock art provide important evidence of Aboriginal culture and creativity. They also depict historical events, such as the arrival of Macassan praus and European ships. They provide environmental data of considerable interest to science. An example is the paintings of thylacines (Tasmanian tigers) in Arnhem Land in the Northern Territory.

Contact sites where Aboriginal and white people met are of historical interest. Some, such as massacre sites, are of special significance to Indigenous people. Many other places have sacred or other symbolic significance for Aboriginal people.

Historic areas, structures and places provide tangible evidence of Australia's immediate past. They are the cultural

roots of contemporary society. Historic places include both the most imaginative architectural and artistic expressions of other times. These places typify life and work in Australia over the last 200 years.

Historic buildings and areas preserved from other eras provide us with a diversity of building forms which give great character to our cities and countryside.

Preservation of Australia's heritage of objects and artefacts
Historic artefacts and objects need to be preserved for the same reasons that prehistoric and historic places need to be preserved. Some are illustrative of ancient Indigenous culture, some represent the finest expressions of national creativity and some are essential evidence of the history of Australian society.

Once destroyed, these places and objects can never be replaced.

The protection of Australia's heritage

The first ever piece of national heritage protective legislation, the Australian Heritage Commission Act, was passed by the federal parliament in 1975. The act brought into being the Australian Heritage Commission, whose principal responsibilities included the establishment of the Register of the National Estate. This Register became in time an extensive listing of over thirteen thousand places of natural and cultural heritage value in Australia. The Australian Heritage Commission act remained in force for eighteen years, withstanding many changes in government.

When the Australian Heritage Commission was replaced by the Australian Heritage Council in 2003, some significant changes were made.

Firstly, the Council's powers were diminished in comparison to the powers of the Commission.

Secondly, two new lists were created; the National Heritage List and the Commonwealth Heritage List. Both lists are now given full protection by the Australian Government. This was an important improvement. But in combination, the two new lists include only a fraction of the number of the places on the former Register of the National Estate. There are, for example, little more than 100 places listed on the National Register, nearly all of which are government owned. The National Heritage List

includes places of national significance that have *outstanding heritage value to the nation*. The Australian Heritage Council makes an initial assessment of all nominations, but unlike the Australian Heritage Commission which had the responsibility of putting places directly on its Register, it is the Minister who determines whether or not a place is listed under the new act. The second new list, the Commonwealth Heritage List, contains properties of heritage value that are located on Commonwealth owned land or controlled by the Commonwealth.

Thirdly, in 2003, the Register of the National Estate was frozen (at which point the Register contained 13,127 places), meaning that no new places could be added or removed. The Register was to be continued as a statutory register until February 2012. During that period, the responsible Minister was required to take account of places on the Register when making decisions under the *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999*. From February 2012, however, all references to the Register were to be removed from federal heritage legislation. The Register would be maintained after this time as a publicly available archive, forming part of the Australian Heritage Database.

Many have argued that the change of status and capping of the number of listed places on the Register of the National Estate was a backward step for national heritage policy given that the Register covers an entire continent and surrounding islands, includes places representative of the full natural history of the land and includes places representative of a continuous 50,000 year Indigenous history together with the more recent history of settlement. With over 60,000 places listed on the US National Register of Historic Sites and over 450,000 historic places listed solely in the UK, it can hardly be said that the 13,000 places currently listed in the Register of the National Estate in Australia is excessive. The Register of the National Estate also plays an important educational role as a significant inventory of places of conservation value across Australia and it also offers a further – albeit limited – level of heritage protection. These are important issues that have never been fully addressed by any government.

Protection offered for heritage sites within Australian states and territories takes many different forms. Natural areas are protected in national parks, nature reserves and

the like. There is legislation across Australia protecting places of prehistoric or Indigenous significance. Every state and territory now has some form of heritage legislation protecting historic buildings and sites. Historic areas and towns are largely protected in planning schemes.

The main form of protection offered for objects of heritage and artistic significance is in museum, art gallery and library collections. Every state and territory has its own art gallery and library (including significant Australian collections). Also, there are now museums of anthropology (including Australian material) and museums of Australian history in most federal and state jurisdictions. With the exception of prehistoric artefacts, most of Australia's heritage of objects and artefacts is in private hands and is therefore treated differently to heritage places, which are subject to greater controls.

Non-government bodies

Non-government bodies have been and remain of great significance to the protection of Australia's National Estate. The most important national environmental bodies are the Australian Conservation Foundation and the Wilderness Society. There are Conservation Councils within the states representing the myriad of smaller environmental bodies. Also of longstanding significance are the National Parks Associations. Some bodies, such as The Bush Heritage Fund, raise money through donations in order to purchase and manage lands of conservation value.

In addition to these Australian bodies, major international bodies also have active branches in Australia. Among the most prominent are the World Wildlife Fund (WWF), Greenpeace and Friends of the Earth.

The National Trusts have played an important role in fostering the protection of cultural sites. There are National Trusts in every state and territory, and an Australian Council of National Trusts in Canberra. Most Trusts are incorporated by statute, although they operate independently of government. The Trusts are owners and managers of many significant buildings across Australia. Their other very significant role has been the classification and listing of historic sites, structures and gardens. While these lists offer no protection themselves, they have had a major influence on the formal listings of historic properties on government registers.

The most important international cultural heritage body is Australia ICOMOS (associated with the International Council on Monuments and Sites). It has focused on the development of codes of practice and improvement in professional standards. Of particular note has been the Australia ICOMOS charter for the conservation of places of cultural significance, known as the Burra Charter, which provides guidance for the conservation and management of Australian heritage places of cultural significance.

Non-government organisations have not played quite such an active role in the protection of objects and artefacts. There are nevertheless important bodies such as historical and library associations across Australia.

World heritage

Australia is a signatory to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) Convention for the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage. UNESCO's World Heritage Centre states:

“Our cultural and natural heritage are both irreplaceable sources of life and inspiration. Places as unique and diverse as the wilds of East Africa's Serengeti, the Pyramids of Egypt, the Great Barrier Reef in Australia and the Baroque cathedrals of Latin America make up our world's heritage. What makes the concept of World Heritage exceptional is its universal application. World Heritage sites belong to all the peoples of the world, irrespective of the territory on which they are located.”

In January 2012, there were 936 properties on the World Heritage List: 725 cultural, 183 natural and 28 mixed from 153 countries. Australia has some 40 properties listed. Most are areas of universal natural significance, such as the Great Barrier Reef, the Tasmanian Wilderness Area, Lord Howe Island and Shark Bay. There are, however, some properties of universal cultural value. The most important are Kakadu National Park and Willandra Lakes, both also World Heritage natural areas and both of which contain evidence of very early human occupation of the Australian continent. There are also a few sites of universal historical significance: the Royal Exhibition Building in Melbourne, the Sydney Opera House, and 11 convict sites. Descriptions and statements of significance of all world heritage listings, including Australian listings, are available on the UNESCO World Heritage website (see below).

Useful sources

Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999. Retrieved 09 August 2013 from <http://www.environment.gov.au/epbc/index.html>

This Act sets out Australia's national heritage conservation regime.

The Australian Heritage Council website. Retrieved 09 August 2013 from <http://www.ahc.gov.au/>

This site provides a full description of the role of the Council and the Council's membership and activities.

National Trusts of Australia website. Retrieved 09 August 2013 from <http://www.nationaltrust.org.au/>

The National Trusts of Australia is a community-based, non-government organisation, committed to promoting and conserving Australia's Indigenous, natural and historic heritage through its advocacy work and its custodianship of heritage places and objects. This website links to Australian National Trust properties in each State and Territory.

Productivity Commission, (2006). *Conservation of Australia's Historic Heritage Places*. Productivity Commission, Canberra. Retrieved 09 August 2013 from <http://www.pc.gov.au/projects/inquiry/heritage>

This report provides a very useful overview of the conservation of historic properties across Australia.

The Australian Heritage Database. Retrieved 09 August 2013 from <http://www.environment.gov.au/cgi-bin/ahdb/search.pl>

The Australian Heritage Database, previously the Register of the National Estate, contains information about more than 20,000 natural, historic and Indigenous places in Australia.

The World Heritage Convention. Retrieved 09 August 2013 from <http://whc.unesco.org/en/conventiontext/>

This website provides full information about the Convention, including lists of natural and cultural properties on the World Heritage List.

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