

Submission to Productivity Commissions Heritage Inquiry.

362 community groups throughout New South Wales, concerned with history and heritage, are affiliated to the Royal Australian Historical Society, at its headquarters in a historic town-house in Macquarie Street, Sydney. Through visits, talks, interchange of information, the award of grants and an annual conference the Royal Australian Historical Society is well informed about the concerns and needs of such cultural heritage groups in the state, particularly at the local level.

All the affiliated historical societies have cultural collections of some sort, documentary, graphic and artefactual, although many do not maintain an actual museum. These collections have characteristically been assembled from local donors through the goodwill which is generated by dedicated volunteers within a disciplined organisation. The very large number of manuscripts, ephemeral publications, photographs, prints and material objects which is held by local societies constitutes a **distributed national collection of cultural material** which is irreplaceable.

The societies which have created and preserved these assemblages are dependent on volunteer labour, on gifts of shelving, filing cabinets, display cases and conservation materials and usually also on rent-free accommodation in some disused historic building owned by some branch of government. Grants for individual projects in conservation, research or publication are available through State and Federal governments on a modest scale. Otherwise the societies survive on a budget which is far more limited than the importance of their activities. But this distributed collection is a unique resource for answering searching questions about development, community linkages, ecology, environment and heritage at the local level, and without appropriate local studies, a national synthesis is impoverished.

In common with many other community organisations, the historical and heritage societies are finding that their membership is ageing and that new members and particularly new volunteers for necessary tasks are harder to find. The societies will survive and so will their collections, but with degrees of difficulty. Because of the importance of the collections and the community respect for them, it is vital that more reliable assistance be provided by governments.

Each of these collections exists in an historical context which it is convenient to call **heritage**. Heritage consists not just of older, attractive buildings, both public and private: it also comprises the totality of the evidence over time of the activities of people in that area, their public amenities, their commercial and shopping facilities, their leisure, their water supply, their natural environment. So industrial buildings, streetscapes, landscapes, archaeological sites, remains of mining and so forth are all part of the **outdoor museum** which is heritage.

Many country towns and villages in rural New South Wales, and elsewhere, have suffered problems of economic decline and of depopulation in recent decades. A major asset which such communities can harness is heritage, not as a dead thing but as a way of presenting to the visitor an educative attraction. A town like Broken Hill which has lost most of its mining viability has found imaginative ways of encouraging cultural tourism through its heritage. In many smaller communities the local historical society's ability to display material and to participate in the interpretation of the district's heritage is a key factor in supporting local government, local tourism organisations and local businesses through difficult times.

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The cultural resources of Australia are most visibly presented by the major museums, galleries and libraries, and these deserve a high level of support from governments because of their intellectual, economic, touristic and community significance. But the collections distributed throughout the smaller centres of Australia have a similar role and in some ways a role which is even more essential to the physical and cultural well-being of each small community, for an outer suburb or a country town is less buffered by a diversity of assets than metropolitan Sydney or Melbourne.

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