



The Australian Academy of the Humanities

Submission to the Productivity Commission on the Conservation of Australia's Historic Heritage Places (Issues Paper May 2005)

The Australian Academy of the Humanities (AAH) thanks the Commission for the opportunity to submit its views and recommendations on current and future trends in the conservation of Australia's historic heritage places. It also intends to send at least one staff member to the public hearing on these issues in Canberra on 15 August 2005 (please find accompanying registration form).

Several of our 400+ Fellows have made submissions to the Commission personally, since heritage conservation is an issue close to many humanists' hearts. The AAH wishes to make only a general submission at present — ordered under headings taken from the six points of scoping inquiry — but it is enthusiastic to remain involved in all further review processes.

1. Main pressures on the conservation of historic heritage places

The AAH identifies here just four key pressures:

- Inadequacy of funding from either private or public sectors in all areas to maintain, restore, manage and protect historic heritage places.
- Inadequacy of contributions from scholarly professionals to confirm the objectives and extent of restoration required. There is a current concern among many conservationist scholars that some historic heritage sites are being 'over-restored' in an effort to produce what many deem to be 'historical stereotypes.' Conservationist scholars urge officials to consider the unique character of each site when restoring, rather than the generic form that a site is presumed to represent.
- Intensity of the market to redevelop over historic heritage places.
- Differential conservation controls. In order to conserve a single building, conservation controls may need to be placed on surrounding buildings as well as the single site under consideration. In terms of domestic residences, a neighbourhood as a whole generally gains in value if it contains a heritage site, even while the site itself may become depressed in value because of the controls placed upon it. Shared responsibility for observing conservation measures by site owners *and* their neighbours could end up with increased value all-round, as well as better conservation results.

2. Benefits and value-quantification of the conservation of historic heritage places

First, the AAH emphatically underscores the "intangible" benefits listed as possible motivations for heritage conservation on pages 11-13 in the Commission's Issues Paper. Without doubt, historic heritage places help to provide Australian communities with a sense of history, belonging, and spirituality. Together, these often strengthen national morale and identity. That heritage "may also benefit future generations" is a certainty, not just a probability: heritage is fundamentally about future interests as much as it is about present ones.

Second, the AAH stresses the educational benefits of conserving historic heritage places. By experiencing the past in embodied structures, pupils not only learn about their community but also learn new modes of learning. Historic heritage places expand the possibilities for learning, by adding material culture to the word as avenues for discovery. Their educative value relates, then, to both content and method.

Third, the potential benefit from cultural tourism of historic heritage places is increasing all the time. There exist more and more tourists who are knowledgeable about and seek to witness the

nuances behind heritage conservation. These tourists prefer not to see over-restored cultural stereotypes but rather wish to find authentic untouched fabrics; stages of decision-making and the evidence of change; a diversity of conservation interpretations on display; and – where possible – the written scholarship behind restoration. One of our Fellows, architectural professor Miles Lewis, is particularly knowledgeable about Australian cultural tourism: please refer to milesbl@unimelb.edu.au.

Finally, the AAH wishes to make the point — in response to the Issues Paper’s query about the possibility of quantifying “diffuse” benefits — that scholars in history, archaeology, economics, and sociology — to name just a few human sciences — are trained specifically to assess, evaluate and comment upon just these qualities all the time. Such qualities as identity and the value of the past can be addressed if officials take seriously the work of appropriate scholars.

It should be noted that indirect investment in scholarship and education can be just as profitable, therefore, as direct investment in tourism if the benefits of conserving heritage are viewed holistically.

3. Current relative roles and contributions to the conservation of historic heritage places

Some of our Fellows have voiced their concern over what they perceive to be a diminished role for the Australian Heritage Council and the consequent diminishment of the ability to maintain and disseminate national standards and principles for conservation. In general the AAH supports the view that a strong central body can help oversee and verify quality in conservation at the national level.

The AAH also notes the poor financial state of the National Trust and its consequent diminishment of ability.

Fellows note the absence of any uniformity in state agencies, citing the Historic Houses Trust of NSW as being without proper equivalent in other states and thereby creating problematic unevenness across the nation as a whole.

Finally, Fellows note the scarcity of trained specialist conservation developers as are evident in many European countries.

The AAH supports the view that government contributions to conservation can be made beneficially and efficiently by increasing the funds and eminence of existing agencies and by helping to create competitive courses for conservationist development education.

4. Impacts of regulatory, taxation and institutional arrangements on the conservation of historic heritage places

The regulatory arrangement for conservation as it stands is too uneven and superficial. The AAH calls for better regulatory standards in training and in process. Currently there is little professional training for conservation architects in Australia, and no system of accreditation. Until there is high-quality and accessible training and accreditation, as well as a requirement to employ accredited practitioners on all publicly funded or sanctioned work, much restoration may cause more damage than good.

Additionally, the current practice of merging conservation analysis and conservation planning into one process or document — typically called a ‘conservation management plan’ and prepared as a single commission by a single consultant — has caused some problems: analysis is often subordinated to planning priorities; the best available expertise is not most effectively utilised; and too frequently the whole process is obscured from public review. The AAH recommends that analysis and planning should be split and taken up by different groups and that the whole process be made more public. The analysis of a place, which establishes how and why it is culturally significant, should be completed, scrutinised and endorsed, before any conservation measures are taken. This initial work should be undertaken by specialist historians and archaeologists. The conservation plan, designed to conserve and enhance cultural significance, should then be done separately by conservation architects, engineers, curators, and display specialists.

On other arrangements, the AAH feels that better tax incentives for conservation could exist, as they do in the US. Institutionally, better funding and support could make the work that agencies do more effective.

Simple changes to conservation policy, tax laws, and attitude on the part of government can make a big difference without excessive hand-out costs.

5. Emerging trends that offer potential new approaches to the conservation of historic heritage places

As mentioned under heading number 2, the AAH notes the steady growth of cultural tourism of heritage sites in Australia. Investment in areas of conservationist scholarship, conservationist education, and conservationist institutions can all maximise and further stimulate this emerging trend.

6. Possible policy and programme approaches for managing the conservation of Australia's historic heritage places and competing objectives and interests

In conclusion, the AAH makes the following recommendations:

- a) the government should increase funding to and status of existent conservationist agencies.
- b) the government should create a body of high standards for conservation through due attention to scholarly advice and the encouragement of specialist education.
- c) governments should place conservation controls on whole areas or 'vistas' rather than on single sites when reviewing private residences.
- d) officials should break down the current 'conservation management plan' practice into stages of specialism and make the whole process more accountable.
- e) the government should view tax incentives, agency support, and investment in scholarship and education as part of the whole picture of conservation.

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29 July 2005