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Conserving and Managing Cultural Heritage

Much archaeological fieldwork in Australia is carried out within the confines of cultural heritage management projects—the “business” of archaeological consultancy. Cultural heritage management (sometimes referred to as cultural resource management) is the branch of archaeology that deals with assessing the effects of development or other potentially harmful human activity on heritage sites, and taking steps to either protect sites or to allow their destruction. The standard process for any archaeological consultancy project is to investigate a site or area, record any artifacts or relevant sites within it, and then assess the significance of those sites or relics so that appropriate strategies for conserving and managing them can be implemented. Significance assessment, conservation and management, therefore, are the three key skills that an archaeologist must cultivate if they are to work successfully in this field. Specialist non-Indigenous personnel who have undertaken specialist training as part of archaeology, anthropology, natural resources or land management degrees have traditionally practiced cultural heritage management. The current demand for cultural heritage management by Indigenous peoples not only requires a recognition of their specific needs and requirements, but also the general higher priority given to the protection and management of the physical remains of the past by Indigenous peoples.

One of the main tasks of cultural heritage management is to assess which heritage sites are important enough to preserve and why, and which are not (and why). This requires an understanding of the process of assessing cultural significance, or those aspects of a place that make it of value to society. The entire Australian conservation community, including non-government organizations such as the National Trust, follows the Burra Charter model for assessing cultural significance and conserving places of cultural significance. The Burra Charter is the informal nickname given to the *Australian ICOMOS Charter for the Conservation of Places of Cultural Significance* (1999), prepared by the Australian National Committee of the International Council on Monuments and Sites* (Australia ICOMOS). The Charter was developed as the local response to issues which arose in the original Venice International Charter for the Conservation and Restoration of Monuments and Sites (1964). Its nickname derives from its initial preparation at a meeting in Burra, South Australia, in 1979, although it has been refined several times since then. The current

version is available on line at: <http://www.icomos.org/australia/charter.html>. The Burra Charter codifies two interrelated aspects of best heritage management practice:

- The categories of cultural significance that are relevant in the assessment of heritage places and sites.
- The conservation standards and attitudes that are expected in the practice of good cultural heritage management.

In addition to the Burra Charter, various bodies—most notably the now-defunct Australian Heritage Commission—have attempted to quantify thresholds and other mechanisms for assessing how significant a place might be in an attempt to lessen the subjectivity of the assessment process. In other words, once you understand the categories of the Burra Charter, you then need to go one step further and think about how to assess a place that might fall within one or more of these categories. Not all places are equally significant, so how important does a place have to be to require further management? What is the threshold for arguing that a place has a level of state significance (i.e. important to the state as a whole) rather than regional or local significance? What kinds of attitudes/values do these categories encompass and how can you measure them? Not all of these questions can be answered easily, of course, and the assessment process is always being refined. As a result, this chapter can only provide an outline of the process as it is practiced in Australia, focussing on how significance is assessed under the Burra Charter, what its principles are, and some of the ways in which you can realize this process at an actual site or place.

In essence the process for any cultural heritage management assessment is as follows:

- Decide on what categories of cultural significance are relevant, why and how.
- Grade the significance of components or aspects within each of these categories (i.e. assess relative degrees of significance).
- Assess competing or shared claims to significance and/or differences of opinion about the meaning of the place.
- Draft a statement of significance that describes the outcomes of this process.
- Draft appropriate conservation policy based on the statement of significance (a conservation plan).
- Draft practical management strategies based on this policy (a management plan). This may include evaluating how to accommodate competition over values in management and interpretation.

9.1. The Burra Charter Model for Assessing Significance

There has been much effort over the last 20 years devoted to what criteria are essential for assessing cultural heritage significance, what precisely these criteria entail,