The Role of the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies

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Introduction

I represent the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies and I take it that is the capacity in which I have the honour to be the first speaker at this workshop on the conservation of rock art; for my part I am not a scientist and as a conservator I have some problems maintaining the paint work on my own house.

Preservation of Rock Art Sites

At this workshop I am thinking of conservation as the application of scientific techniques aimed at maintaining the rock art of Australia in good physical condition for some generations to come at least. Any parallel between my household maintenance and that problem is of course somewhat tenuous. According to the advertisements the entire resources of the paint industry of the world have been at my disposal for years developing yet better substances for protecting and decorating my house. Certainly there has been no such devotion of resources to the protection of rock art sites, although in Australia since 1973 the AIAS has in fact supported a rock art conservation section at the Western Australian Museum, for the purpose of devising means of protecting rock art.

The matter is not so simple however. Again, unlike my house maintenance, rock art conservators cannot just slap on a fresh coat of Dulux from time to time but tend to limit their activities to preservation of that which exists, with perhaps a little removal of graffiti and some discouragement of wasps. Conservation techniques have increasing application to all manner of materials and artefacts from the European cultural heritage, and some of those techniques can have application to the Aboriginal heritage provided we can be sure that the application is appropriate, and provided we are sure we understand what we want to happen. In the context of recent European cultural material it is easy enough to know what we want to achieve because we have access to historical records, and it is possible to ascertain what function an item had and what its nature was, thus what parts were missing and how best it could be reconstructed; thus the restoration, reconstruction or conservation can proceed towards a determined goal.

Can that occur in application to Aboriginal rock art? The Mutitjilda cave at Ayers Rock was photographed in 1930 by Michael Terry, and again recorded in greater detail in 1940 by C.P. Mountford and L.E. Sheard. A comparison[1] of the 1930 and 1940 records provided by Mountford in 1965 show that "during the intervening ten years, when Aborigines were still following their tribal life at Ayers Rock, there had been a comparatively rapid change in the paintings on the walls of the Mutitjilda cave".

Some designs had been practically obliterated and replaced by others, some figures had been redrawn, but with changes. The paintings at Ayers Rock were first seen by Mountford in 1935 when they were, in his words, "clean and fresh looking"[1]. Referring to paintings a few yards south of those compared over the period 1930-1940, Mountford said "At the present time (1965) owing to their exposed position and the effects of the elements, many of the designs have practically disappeared".

Mountford also said "There are many paintings scattered throughout the whole frieze, the meanings of which are unknown". That applies to virtually all rock art in Australia today and was certainly an understatement, even in 1940. The conservator thus has a problem. Not only is he unable to be sure what was depicted on the rock wall, but it was so subject to change that restoration or conservation would depend upon chance information as to the nature of the site at some previous date. Because the process of change is no longer happening the result would be a totally arbitrary representation of the art site at one particular time, a bit like assuming

that a photograph of a school teacher's chalk board on any one day would represent that teacher's presentation of his entire curriculum.

A similar problem is raised by water seepage across the surface of rocks. Many rock shelters have patterns of seepage which very likely predate altogether the occupation of the shelters by people. The Aboriginal artists could hardly have failed to be aware of the areas of surface prone to damage, yet they chose — very often repeatedly — to paint on them. Is it possible that they intended certain depictions to be obliterated at the onset of the next rains? What then should we try to conserve by diverting water run-off, and who is to decide that it should happen?

I have confused conservation and restoration. Distinction between them is not always clear, although the prevailing attitude favours conservation and denounces restoration of Aboriginal rock art. To remove undesirable markings, initials and names, recently applied copies of Aboriginal drawings, even natural phenomena like wasps nests is to restore the art to another condition. Science can show us how to remove one substance with the least influence on another, but cannot choose which substance should be removed.

A few years ago[2] I visited a site in the remote Durba Hills in Western Australia to which European names and initials inscribed over Aboriginal paintings included those of early explorers and drovers; but regrettably also the scribblings of those who had made the trip more easily in recent years. Kartudjara men from Jigalong who have since visited the site want the names removed from the art — a process of partial restoration to a condition predating European contact. An historical society with interest in the area however wants retention of the historical names of explorers and drovers, entailing a different restoration.

These are problems of management of sites in Australia arising essentially from the major significant differences between Australian rock art and the palaeolithic art of Europe. In Australia, indigenous rock art is only just ceasing to be a living cultural activity and is recognised by Aborigines as a component of their culture, not a prehistoric relic of a former culture.

The Institute is heavily committed to the preservation of Australia's Aboriginal heritage and published the results of a national seminar on the subject held in May 1972[3]. Uppermost in the minds of participants at that time was the need for effecttive legislation throughout Australia. Legislation was (and is) needed to enable relevant authorities to control sites and provide the right to exercise conservation procedures, erect fences and signs and so on. One trusts that the authorities will act wisely, in the best interests of the wider community, but there can be a degree of conflict of interests. People who got involved in protection for Aboriginal sites thought they were helping to preserve the Aboriginal heritage for posterity but it has become evident that much of the effort gets directed towards the interests of present rather than succeeding generations, and where those interests are Aboriginal it is no bad thing. The original pressure for protection of sites was distinctly archaeological in nature, the protection of prehistoric material both for scientific interests (so that archaeologists could have sites to excavate) and for interested people who recognised a body of art and other sites somewhat similar although far from identical to prehistoric European art. The number of people prepared to endure discomfort — even relative hardship as you may discover next week — and spend money to see the rock art did not fail to impress those with an entrepreneurial turn of mind so that the protectors found unexpected allies at times. The Aboriginal rock art heritage became Australia's prehistoric rock art heritage and accrued a new kind of value. Various interests put up funds to protect sites, there was an increase of publication about rock art and people glowed with newfound pride at succeeding discoveries of previously "unknown" rock art.

I am reminded of D.W. Carnegie, explorer and author of "Spinifex and Sand"[4] who led a major expedition traversing desert country in W.A. as far north as the Kimberleys in 1896/97. He commented throughout the report of the journey on the evidence of Aboriginal occupation, especially in connection with water resources.

"We never once found water by chance — though chance took us to more than one dry hole — but found it only by systematic and patient work, involving many scores of miles of tracking, the capture of the wild Aboriginal, and endless hours of manual labour"[4]. Of the 22 native wells that he located he completely drained 6 and left some water in 5. The remainder were dry. Yet Carnegie said: "it will be seen that the greater part of the interior of the colony seen by us is absolutely useless to man or beast". In all those months of toil across the desert in which his continued survival totally depended upon the local inhabitants' knowledge of water resources, Carnegie had evidently not come to grips with the fact that he was in a land permanently (if sparsely) occupied by people. He was the first European to see much of that land but not the first man.

Similarly, as the rock art in Australia was made by Australian Aborigines it cannot be newly discovered. Over much of the country there is failure to locate the owners of the sites or their descen-

dants rather than absence of relevant Aborigines, although I concede the difficulty to be had in locating and identifying such people. Nevertheless Aboriginal art sites were created by Aborigines, and those people or their descendants live in Australia today. It is as indefensible to assume control over Aboriginal art sites — on whatever pretext — as it was to assume control over land 200 years ago. Worse perhaps; as in many cases at that time land was taken from Aborigines by whites in total ignorance of the way in which the Aborigines possessed and utilized land, although we now know that absence from an area even for long periods was no evidence for assuming non occupation of the area. It would be totally reprehensible for any authority in Australia today to assume that because Aborigines are not easily found in connection with art sites that the sites are available for take-over in the interests of the community, posterity or anything else except as Aborigines are agreed.

At a time when the Institute experiences a critical shortage of funding and is unable to finance but a fraction of the number of projects that it would wish to, responsibility for protection of sites must be taken up by State Governments. It is now over five years since the then Minister for Aborigines, Mr. P. Howson expressed the hope that within five years the major task of identifying sites would have been achieved. Although that has only happened in a few areas, an unprecedented boost to preservation at all levels has been provided in the intervening period. One of the paramount lessons learned in that time has been the need to obtain genuine Aboriginal comment and involvement. There has been a shift in emphasis from recording of archaeological sites, heavily supported by funding at first, to recording sites of direct significance to Aborigines, latterly in connection with such pragmatic issues as land claims. It is now clear that there is a responsibility to involve Aborigines at all levels of activity in connection with sites, and at least where the sites retain traditional significance the Aboriginal control should be total.

On the other hand, I do not advocate abdication of the responsibility already assumed for preservation of sites by the various authorities in Australia, in fact it is imperative that the effort to preserve the Aboriginal heritage be increased. I have said that it is necessary to seek Aboriginal involvement and that there are some very difficult decisions about what to do. There are also difficult decisions about how to do it. For instance, procedures intended to conserve should cause the subject matter to survive longer. It is in this area that those of us with responsibility to preserve sites desperately need good advice from experts. Many of us at this workshop have seen examples of unsympathetically designed, even downright badly conceived projects to protect sites. Some poor decisions arise from basic lack of finance, some procedures have undesirable and unforseen side effects but worst of all some do not work, or cause more damage than if nothing at all were done.

Future generations of Aborigines will undoubtedly have great interest in the visible remnants of their former culture, and rock art will remain perhaps the most important component. Whilst it is possible to generally criticize our predecessors for failure to protect the Aboriginal heritage, future people will be able to specifically condemn those of us who fail today to come up with useful results. It is a very heavy responsibility.

References

1 Mountford C.P. (1965) *Ayers Rock : Its People, Their Beliefs and Their Art*, Angus & Robertson, Sydney.

2 Dix W.C. (1972) *Rock Art Along the Stock Route*, Hemisphere, Canberra, *16*, No. 7, 18-23.

3 Edwards R. (Ed) (1975) *The Preservation of Australia's Aboriginal Heritage*, Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, Canberra.

4 Carnegie D.W. (1973) *Spinifex and Sand*, Penguin Colonial Facsimiles, Ringwood, Victoria p. 432-433.