

The Aboriginal Sites Department, Western Australian Museum

B. J. Wright

Functions of the Aboriginal Sites Department

The Aboriginal Sites Department was established within the Western Australian Museum in 1970 to carry out a programme of Aboriginal site recording and protection. The Department became responsible for administering the Western Australian Government *Aboriginal Heritage Act* when it was proclaimed in 1972. The purpose of the legislation is to provide for the recording and protection, on behalf of the community, of places and objects of importance in Aboriginal culture. Within the Museum, Aboriginal studies are also undertaken by the Anthropology Department and the Archaeology Department. The work undertaken by those Departments ranges over the whole field of Aboriginal culture, social organisation and prehistory, while the work of the Aboriginal Sites Department is focused specifically on Aboriginal sites.

This programme includes the following features:

Site Recording

The Department carries out a continuous programme of site recording through:

- (i) processing reports received from the public;
- (ii) regular survey work undertaken by staff;
- (iii) special surveys resulting from the developmental work of Government Departments or commercial firms (usually mining companies).

The Department is required under the Act to maintain a Site Register in which there are currently more than 3,500 entries.

Site Protection

The protection of Aboriginal sites is being attempted through:

- (i) Legal Protection — declaration of some outstanding sites as "protected areas" under the *Aboriginal Heritage Act*;
- (ii) Physical Protection — provision of explanatory notices, fences, grilles, etc. at sites;

- (iii) Supervision — the Act provides for the appointment of Honorary Wardens. Some traditional Aboriginal custodians of sites have been appointed and appropriate powers have been delegated to them. It is hoped that Mobile Rangers will be appointed in the future.
- (iv) Control of Access — funds have been made available for the appointment of a resident Ranger at Woodstock Reserve in the Pilbara to control and supervise access to the outstanding sites of this area.

Training

The Aboriginal Site Preservation Training Programme commenced in 1974. Six Aboriginal persons spent two years in training, learning the basic skills of site recording and protection. Three of these are now employed as Technical Assistants within the Aboriginal Sites Department.

A one year part-time training programme for several Aboriginal men from the Western Desert area is now being conducted at the request of the Warburton Community.

Both programmes have been funded by the Aboriginal Arts Board and the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies.

Public Education

At present informational material, including a set of 20 transparencies, is available. Material is being distributed to the public on request, and to mining companies on a regular basis. Members of the Sites Department staff give lectures to university and tertiary college groups, police officers, and other interested groups. There is a need to intensify this aspect of the work because, ultimately, site protection will depend on the development of public awareness and an appreciation of Aboriginal cultural material and sites.