

LOST OR FOUND? INTANGIBLE CULTURAL HERITAGE Is intangible cultural heritage now part of 'place-based heritage practice' or is it still lost in the wilderness?

Thursday 14 November, 1.00pm – 3.50pm

Susan Dale Donaldson: Protecting country along the Alice Springs to Darwin railway line

I chose to talk to you today about the heritage assessment triggered by the construction of the Alice Springs to Darwin railway line, even though it took place 20 years ago, because in my view it was a mammoth and successful undertaking in terms of understanding, conserving and safeguarding indigenous intangible cultural heritage in Australia.

Because I only have ten minutes, I am going to provide a quick background then dive onto how the methodology employed is reflected in the ICOMOS Intangible Cultural Heritage & Place Practice Note.

QUICK FACTS

The protection of intangible cultural heritage in the NT of Australia has been enshrined in legislation since 1976, where a 'sacred site' is defined as "... a site that is sacred to Aboriginals or is otherwise of significance according to Aboriginal tradition..." .

Whilst linking Alice Springs to Darwin by rail had been suggested since the early 1900s, it wasn't until funding was allocated in 1982 and the documentation of 'sacred sites' potentially affected by the proposed development began. The funds ran out and the process was popularised by Bruce Chatwin's 1987 book 'Songlines'.

By 1998 further funds were committed and the heritage survey continued along the proposed railway corridor which became 200m wide and 1420km long. The proposed development affected 69 Aboriginal communities associated with 17 Aboriginal languages and dozens of Traditional Aboriginal landowning groups.

The survey directly involved Traditional Aboriginal Owners whose spiritual knowledge and attachments to the cultural landscape were documented. The proposed construction corridor was crisscrossed by dozens of ancient mythological dreaming tracks associated with hundreds of sacred sites.

The proposed corridor was realigned and redesigned in multiple sections in order to avoid or minimise impact to places with intangible cultural heritage elements such as song cycles, stories, named places, rituals and cultural practices.

The construction of the railway line began in 2001 and took three years. Work restrictions were agreed upon with the aim of safeguarding the identified intangible cultural heritage elements. The first train zoomed up the line in 2004, along a slightly curved track which respected the ancient landscape.

HOW DOES THE RAILWAY SURVEY RELATE TO COMMON PRACTICE ISSUES IDENTIFIED IN THE 2017 ICOMOS INTANGIBLE CULTURAL HERITAGE AND PLACE PRACTICE NOTE?

ISSUE: It is common for *Intangible cultural heritage to be overlooked*

Not in this case. In the Central Desert of Australia indigenous oral traditions including song cycles and storytelling, combined with place-based knowledge were integrated into the design and construction of the project. Entire fieldwork teams applied an agreed methodology to address intangible cultural heritage issues. Some features of the methodology included:

- o Undertaking research with Traditional Owners to **determine tribal boundaries** along the length of the corridor. The 450 km section between Barrow Creek and Newcastle Waters, for instance, involved 15 Aboriginal land-owning groups.
- o We then **identified sacred sites** within or close to the railway corridor with each Aboriginal landowning group. Types of sites identified included ritual sites, burials, and mythological dreaming sites which ranged from individual trees, swathes of particular vegetation, creeks, flood outs, rock holes, rocky outcrops, soil types and soakages.
- o Traditional Owners, engineers, lawyers, anthropologists, and project managers then collaborated to determine the **best possible site protection method**. Solutions included increasing bridge spans over important water courses; reducing ground disturbance by using fill rather than digging; realigning the corridor; reducing the width of the construction corridor; fencing and marking sites; determining Restricted Work Areas and employing Aboriginal knowledge holders to monitor construction works.
- o The **proposed corridor was rerouted in multiple locations to avoid places with intangible cultural heritage attributes such as rocks associated with rituals and trees symbolising the activities of mythological beings**. Realigning the corridor to avoid for instance one tree would require alterations to the line for many kms to the north and south of the site to ensure curvature met railway engineering standards. Entire sections were thus surveyed and resurveyed again.
- o In some cases where the line could not be rerouted and where TOs had agreed for one of their sites to be destroyed or damaged, **compensation** was awarded to TOs to acknowledge their loss.

It is also important to appreciate the relationship between place and cultural practices

It was imperative that tribal boundaries along the 200m wide corridor were identified to ensure the right people were enabled to be make decisions about their own country. Certainly, the researchers were held accountable if ‘the wrong people’ were invited to assess sections of the line deemed to be within another group’s country.

Cultural practices relating to making decisions about county can be affected by ownership disputes. In one disputed section of the line TOs negotiated a temporary boundary point between their areas of jurisdiction for the sole purpose of not holding up the development.

Some sections of the railway corridor were known to be owned by groups whose members had all passed away. In Central Australia it is customary law that land cannot be left empty. As such the tribal groups associated with country either side of the empty land acted as custodians for the purposes of managing the cultural heritage for the project.

Another aspect to understand is how cultural practices contributor to the cultural significance of a place

On one occasion TOs instructions to avoid a ritual rock formation was not adhered to, the site was desecrated, and a senior male custodian became ill and died soon after. The death was directly attributed to the impingement. Construction project managers were called to account and senior men were compensated for their loss. The incident is regularly recalled by TOs in the region when discussing how to implement safeguarding measures; for them the best way was to engage TOs to monitor construction work.

Heritage practitioners working with intangible heritage must understand the ways cultural practices are sustained

The actual survey was utilised by TOs to access country not visited for a long time, in some cases since people 'lived naked' and hunted for their meals. Accordingly, customary practices were exercised upon arrival at certain places, such as cleaning water soaks and communicating with the spiritual ancestors residing in the land, apologising for the lengthy time since the last visit.

The survey was also utilised by TOs as a means to transfer cultural knowledge to the next generation. Whilst the focus of the survey was on the 200m wide corridor, the anthropological investigation involved cultural mapping so that everyone understood the landscape that was being documented and protected. Today, 20 years on, the generation that were learning on these trips are now holders of important cultural knowledge lost in other places where the opportunity to transfer the knowledge was not present.

Another form of sustaining cultural practices was in a situation where senior people knew of an important tree, but had forgotten the name and dreaming association. As a result of cultural heritage work along the line 15 years earlier involving TOs who had passed away, participants instructed researchers to relay what their fathers had said in relation to the significance of that particular site. Critical cultural information was transmitted from the old report to the participants which resulted in the site in question being protected as well as the revitalisation of particular cultural knowledge.

Some sites along the proposed route had suffered damage from past developments which in turn effected cultural practices. For instance, the construction of the Stuart Highway through The Devil's Marbles Conservation Reserve [Karlu Karlu], occurred at a time when Aboriginal people were not legally entitled to protect country. The original rail route followed the road corridor through this site. Now armed with the legal right to protect country, the TOs instructed the authorities to shift the railway corridor well west of the site to avoid further damage and emotional / spiritual suffering for TOs.

CLOSING REMARKS

The overall approach to understanding and conserving intangible cultural heritage elements along the Alice Springs to Darwin Railway corridor empowered the relevant Aboriginal groups to actively protect their heritage in accordance with their customary laws.

The approach was also beneficial for Traditional Aboriginal Owners as their participation enabled the transmission of important cultural knowledge to the next generation of custodians and provided opportunities for customary practices to be exercised.

To some extent the railway track and the trains that now travel along it fit into the existing cultural landscape. Aboriginal people in Central Australia have the ability to conceptualise the landscape from the sky, travelling in the air above the network of mythological dreaming routes. The railway development and the ancient dreaming tracks are both lineal in nature; the railway line has become another track along which people travel.

In the Central Desert region of the NT intangible cultural heritage practice is not 'lost' in the legal wilderness; it was officially 'found' when incorporated into legislation 40 years ago. A consideration of intangible cultural heritage is an integral part of place base heritage practice in the NT. In my view the 2017 ICOMOS intangible cultural heritage practice note and case studies like this one offer important guidance and help promote rigorous heritage practice in Australia.

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