

Playing God with History?
Creating 'wild nature' from living landscapes

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Abstract. In Australia today, many protected areas are being actively created as solely 'natural' landscapes. Peoples' social and spiritual attachments to these landscapes are not being adequately recognised or effectively integrated into management planning and practice. A failure to incorporate social and spiritual values into protected area management is a threat to peoples' continued attachment and belonging to special places. The paper examines the way in which the discourse of ecosystem management can 'displace' culture and heritage from many protected areas. It is argued that environmental history and cultural landscape approaches offer ways of addressing the need to integrate understandings of attachment, identity and place, central to the concept of 'spirit of place', into protected area management.

Introduction

In Australia the creation of the New South Wales National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS) in the 1960s was specifically modelled on the US National Park Service approach. This approach incorporated ideas of the time about the recreation of a pre-colonial ecological scene (Leopold et al. 1963) that included the removal of past owners, workers, visitors and, to varying degrees, Indigenous custodians. 'Removal' in the Australian and United States contexts was not about involuntary resettlement (as in more recent times in many developing countries) but represented a failure to acknowledge people's historical and spiritual connections to protected area landscapes.

In 2008, protected areas in New South Wales (NSW) are managed in accordance with principles prescribed in legislation and these include the conservation of natural and cultural values. While the heritage values of tangible objects and places within NSW protected areas are relatively

well documented, social and spiritual values are generally not well understood particularly with regard to intangible values under headings such as belonging, community identity and well being. A focus on the tangible or material traces of history combined with a failure to recognise the social/spiritual values of places/landscapes thus ‘leads to a misrepresentation of cultural significance’ (Byrne 2008, 157). Therefore ‘conserving’ cultural values as mandated by legislation in NSW, and in accord with the Australia ICOMOS Burra Charter, becomes problematic.

In this paper, I will focus on the way that the language of biodiversity conservation has resulted in, and continues to result in, the removal or ‘discursive displacement’ of culture and heritage from protected areas. I argue that this form of displacement explains in part the failure to incorporate social and spiritual values into the management regime of many protected areas in Australia. A consequence of displacement is that an impression is created that the landscape is a wilderness – that it does not have a human history.

For the purpose of this paper, ‘spirit of place’ is taken to be equivalent to ‘sense of place’. Although ‘spirit of place’ seems to imply that it is intrinsic to a locality or an actual deity, I do not use it in this way but rather view spirit of place as socially constructed and dynamic. Fundamental to the concept of ‘spirit of place’ as applied in this paper is the idea that the special feelings (positive and/or negative) held by an individual or group of people for a place foster a sense of attachment and belonging.

International Context of Protected Areas

The establishment of protected areas has a long history, generally regarded to have begun with the declaration of Yellowstone National Park in the USA in 1872. In 2005, the World Database on Protected Areas recorded 113,707 protected areas covering 19.6 million square kilometres over 12 per cent of the planet’s surface (Lockwood 2006, 96-98).

The National Reserve System, Australia’s network of protected areas, is made up of over 9000 protected areas covering 89 million hectares – more than 11% of the continent. It comprises national parks, Indigenous lands, reserves run by non-profit conservation groups, through to ecosystems protected by farmers on their private working properties. In NSW more than 6.6 million hectares of land (8.3% of NSW) is managed for conservation, education and public enjoyment.

Debate around the extent to which cultural and spiritual values are integrated with nature conservation in protected area management has a long, contested and continuing history (for some recent perspectives see for example Goodall 2006; Kalamandeen and Gillson 2007; Phillips 2002; Plumwood 2006; Locke and Dearden 2005). The IUCN six-category system of protected areas implies a gradation of human intervention. In Category 1a areas (Strict nature reserve), human intervention is generally restricted to scientific research and low-intensity, passive recreation while Category V (Protected landscape/seascape) and Category VI (Managed resource protected areas) allow for communities to reside, work and make a livelihood (Lockwood 2006, 83). In all classes, biodiversity conservation is a core goal of management, though the IUCN protected area category guideline emphasises the objectives of management rather than the title of the area (IUCN 1994).

A review of the IUCN system of management categories for protected areas undertaken in 2004 recommended giving 'greater recognition to cultural and spiritual values, so that the full range of special qualities of each protected area is recognised' (Bishop et al. 2004, 36). The report also recommended that priority be given to monitoring and research around the implications of each management category for indigenous and local communities.

'Displacement' of Cultural and Heritage

The term 'displacement' is generally used to refer to an impact that necessitates resettlement (sometimes forced or involuntary) of affected persons. Resettlement is the key issue in establishing and managing protected areas in developing countries (for example, displacement and relocation from protected areas are the focus of Volume 4 No. 3 of the journal *Conservation and Society*). Displacement is most commonly defined in physical terms (where affected persons are required to relocate) or socio-economic terms (the impact of loss of incomes forces the affected persons to move or to initiate alternative strategies of income restoration).

The World Bank policy on *Involuntary Resettlement* covers direct economic and social impacts and includes 'the involuntary restriction of access to legally designated protected areas resulting in adverse impacts on the livelihoods of the displaced persons' (The World Bank 2001). This situation may arise because people have been moved out of a protected area and/or because people residing on the edges of a protected area are denied access to resources within it.

In southeastern Australia, most Aboriginal people were physically displaced from their Country by colonial processes well before the declaration of protected areas. Goodall (2006, 387-388) also recognises that removals of Indigenous people in Australia were not the direct result of the establishment of protected areas but that the creation of protected areas has ultimately impacted on Aboriginal peoples' livelihoods. She argues:

More relevant have been the conservation restrictions placed on hunting and gathering of native species across the broader, off-park landscape. Only after the progressive loss of access to the wider landscape did the specific exclusions from protected areas come to have rising economic and cultural significance.

An example illustrating this point lies in the history of the area that is now Yuraygir National Park, situated on the NSW coastline, 600km north of Sydney. The collection of giant beach worms by Aboriginal people was a particularly important local activity in the period after the Second World War. 'Worming' was an important subsistence activity for economically marginal families (most worms were sold to local fisherman for use as bait), but this activity also had a vital cultural dimension. Worming was a family activity that enabled people to be in their Country. The social learning that accompanied the worming expeditions played an important role in sharing and passing on knowledge and in the reproduction of group, family and individual identity (Kijas 2008). With the creation of national parks in this region from 1975, worming without licences became illegal and this contributed to a gradual decline in the social learning associated with worming and a loss of part of local people's livelihoods.

However, in the realm of culture and heritage in Australia (and potentially many other countries) there is an equivalent form of displacement to the physical, economic and social dimensions touched on above. This form of displacement is a discursive one whereby landscape is constructed as 'natural' through language and ways of thinking. For example, biodiversity criteria developed to establish a comprehensive, adequate and representative (CAR) reserve system for Australia's forests in 1997, include as a general criterion that '15% of the pre-1750 distribution of each forest ecosystem should be protected in the CAR reserve system' (Commonwealth of Australia 1997, 12). Since Australia was not settled by Europeans until 1788, the use of the 'pre-1750' date implies that Australia's forests were untouched, pristine and wilderness, thus discounting the interactions over many thousands of years of humans and forest ecosystems prior to 1750.

The discourse surrounding the establishment of protected areas is also largely framed by the ‘scientific’ language of biodiversity conservation or ecosystem management. For example, the establishment of a CAR system of ecologically viable protected areas is a central principle of the *National Strategy for the Conservation of Australia’s Biological Diversity*. While goals articulated in this strategy to conserve Australia’s biological diversity are valid in themselves, it is the parallel neglect of cultural values that skews the construction of landscape values. The skewing of the full range of values of protected area landscapes is reinforced and accentuated through the construction of protected area categories, particularly Wilderness Area, Nature Reserve and National Park, and the primacy given to ecosystem management based language used to describe these categories.

A consequence of discursive displacement is that there is a tendency toward ‘emptying out’ of many protected area landscapes of culture and heritage, and in particular intangible heritage. This observation is not intended to diminish the necessity to conserve outstanding and representative ecosystems, but to recognise that the current international and Australian approaches which draw almost exclusively on the language of ecosystem management can overlook the significant connections and attachments that people have to landscape. Thus the cultural values of the World Heritage Area listed properties, Gondwana Rainforests of Australia and Greater Blue Mountains Area, are ‘displaced’ because outstanding universal value (OUV) is entirely framed within the discourse of nature and science. For Aboriginal people, these properties contain places of profound cultural significance which may or may not have OUV but are integral to any narrative of them.

There are a number of factors that contribute to this ‘emptying out’ or discursive form of displacement of culture and heritage from protected areas. First, as Goodall (2006) discusses, there can be difficulties in communication between social science and scientific researchers and thus communication between disciplines becomes an obstacle to embracing all landscape values and recognising the links between cultural and natural values. This situation is exacerbated when ‘nature’ and ‘culture’ are separated within organisations responsible for the management of protected areas. This is apparent both at local levels (for example, ‘culture’ and ‘nature’ are administered separately within the NSW Department of Environment and Climate Change - Adams and English 2005) as well as at the international level where, for example world heritage advisory bodies either focus on cultural heritage (ICOMOS; ICCROM) or natural heritage (IUCN).

Second, the process of nominating or listing a property as world heritage can be seen as a tension between the local and the global. Scholze (2008) describes how UNESCO's global cultural policy aims to 'enhance the pride of the local population in their own culture, foster efforts to its preservation as well as to enrich the whole of humanity in creating a cultural memory on a worldwide scale.' However, where properties like Gondwana Rainforests of Australia and Greater Blue Mountains Area are listed without reference to cultural and spiritual values, the opposite affect is achieved. That is, local communities are antagonised because at a world heritage level these landscapes are in a discursive sense portrayed as being devoid of culture and heritage and at the level of global dialogue these landscapes have no human history or contemporary local social meaning.

Displacement as a Threat to 'Spirit of Place'

The discursive 'emptying out' of many protected area landscapes of culture and heritage is a threat to spirit of place – it can affect peoples' sense of attachment and belonging. Peoples' sense of attachment and belonging is in most cases dependent upon the need to interact with their special places. That is, there is physical behaviour and social learning associated with forming, maintaining and communicating attachments to place. For example, the worming expeditions of Aboriginal people outlined above relied on physical access and the collecting of giant beach worms in order that the social learning about natural, cultural and spiritual values of Country could be practiced and communicated across generations. By making the collection of worms illegal, because the cultural dimension of collecting this species was not considered in the discourse of nature conservation, Aboriginal peoples' ability to act out their attachment to their Country has been greatly restricted.

Physical access to special places is also an important aspect of enacting out attachment, belonging and community identity. For example, Anglo-Australian holidaymaking at Yuraygir National Park has a history extending over 150 years which is characterised by regular camping at particular places often by the same local family groups (Kijas 2008). Holidaymaking has depended upon ongoing access to camping areas and this activity has in some cases been restricted or made physically impossible (for example, by road closures) by the declaration of the protected area (in 1975). The attachment of Anglo-Australian holidaymakers also becomes threatened after 1975 because holiday camping is constructed as an external pressure in the discourse of ecosystem management, the dominant park management discourse.

Therefore there is a discursive displacement of holiday camping as an ongoing cultural practice and the cultural heritage of local Anglo-Australian holidaymakers.

Discussion: Advancing Cultural Landscape Approaches

In this paper I have described how privileging a 'nature' or ecosystem management discourse and constructing landscape as 'timeless' and without a human history serves to displace culture and heritage. I have tried to use the idea of discursive displacement of culture and heritage by the discourse of nature conservation to explain how this can affect peoples' sense of attachment and belonging and can thus be a threat to spirit of place. Displacement in this sense reflects broader conceptual and structural problems that challenge the integration of culture and nature in protected area management.

What is required to meet this challenge is the recognition of cultural and spiritual values for all protected areas and World Heritage landscapes. There are a number of ways that this might be achieved. One is through a critical examination of assumptions, values and priorities held by conservationists (for example, Kalamandeen and Gillson 2007) and also through a deconstruction of the way in which nature conservation is a discourse set up to exclude culture.

A second way is by writing environmental histories that examine the long-term historical connections between people and environments, past and present. For example, the work undertaken in the Willandra Lakes World Heritage Area of western NSW has constructed a narrative of the entwined evolution, over 40,000 years, of people, climate change, ecology and landscape (Bowler et al. 2003; Lawrence 2006). By marrying environmental science with history in the story of Willandra, 'spirit of place' for contemporary local Aboriginal people, local landowners, scientific researchers and the world heritage community incorporates and integrates ecological and social systems.

Cultural landscape approaches also have a potential greater than their current level of use (for example, by NPWS and IUCN) to support the more effective recognition of cultural and spiritual values in protected area management. This potential has been noted previously and, for example, Mitchell and Buggiey (2000) have described the interface and common ground between IUCN Category V and World Heritage Cultural Landscapes. Cultural landscape approaches recognise that all landscapes are the product of long-term and complex inter-relationships between people and the environment (Brown 2007) and the discursive production of protected areas as cultural landscapes provides an

opportunity to integrate the management of cultural and spiritual values with biophysical values.

Conclusion

The practice of protected area management (like historic preservation and restoration – Low 2008, 402) can disrupt a local community's sense of place attachment and disturb expressions of cultural identity for local populations. This disruption and disturbance may be exacerbated by processes such as the discursive displacement of culture and heritage described in this paper. If there is a failure to identify, acknowledge and respect cultural and spiritual values (of whatever level(s) of significance) and if community aspirations with regard to these values are stifled, then there is the real risk of local community antagonism toward protected areas, world heritage listed properties and biodiversity conservation goals in general.

If understandings of attachment, belonging, identity and place are central to the concept of 'spirit of place', then it follows that these largely intangible values need to be documented and actively integrated into the practice of protected area management. This is a challenging task, but can be addressed through commissioning place-based, social and environmental histories and social value studies and through adopting management approaches that draw on cultural landscape concepts. Protected area management approaches might then address threats to spirit of place by acknowledging existing communities with attachments to protected area landscapes, by articulating the nature of each community's attachment, by respecting each community's right to access places to maintain their connections and by allowing space for attachments and sense of place to continue to evolve. By respecting and acknowledging peoples' attachments to and feelings for special places, protected area managers can help ensure that there is long-term community support for broader conservation goals.

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