

## **Dramatic, Mysterious, Contemplative and Scary: seeking an understanding of the inspirational value of our mountain landscapes**

**Chris Johnston and Juliet Ramsay**

Paper presented at *Celebrating Mountains: An International Year of Mountains Conference*, Jindabyne Australia 24-28 November 2002.

### **Appreciating Australian landscapes**

For most, Australian landscapes are part of being Australian, their colours, shapes, evocations and meanings are prolifically embedded in the cultural life of this country. Mountain landscapes in particular, inspire art, as paintings, poetry, literature, and music. They also inspire thought, feelings, and have spiritual associations.

Although evocations of landscapes, including mountains, are realised and generally highly appreciated through art and stories, those particular values have not been well represented in the majority of the mountain landscapes included on heritage lists. This may be a consequence of the two separate strands of the heritage discipline, cultural and natural, each with different organisational support. Natural conservation groups reflect the interests of scientists and environmentalists, while cultural groups, such as historical societies and national trusts, predominantly reflect history and historic fabric. Universities separate the disciplines of science, from humanities and the arts while a number of State and Territory environmental and heritage agencies have separate natural conservation and cultural heritage legislation. However, the protection of landscapes at the international level - the *World Heritage Convention (1972)* and at the national level – the former *Australian Heritage Commission Act (1975)* and the *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act (1999)* established protection of both the cultural and natural values of places together in their respective legal acts.

Approximately 544 mountains and ranges are in the Register of the National Estate, 221 include Aboriginal values, 80 of the records are for historic places (mostly mining sites and huts) in mountain locations while the aesthetic value of the places is seldom mentioned and at best is noted as 'scenic quality'.

This gap in the heritage record is the consequence of the challenges in assessing the aesthetic and social values of landscapes. The assessment task has been challenged as subjective and has not been seen as comparable to the confident and quantitative scientific assessment methodologies applied for natural scientific values. Natural heritage scientists appear uncomfortable with the descriptive language used to capture aesthetic landscape values. It is far easier for a landscape to be listed for its biodiversity than for its aesthetic or inspirational values. The focus on science has meant many heritage landscape records lack an understanding of the true cultural heritage depth of these places.

The heritage assessment studies for the Regional Forest Agreements (RFAs) conducted from 1993 - 1999<sup>1</sup>, that provided impetus for further effort into landscape methodology research and its application. A peer review workshop<sup>2</sup> with a range of aesthetic experts from diverse backgrounds, reviewed methods, established a suitable definition for aesthetic value that could be applied to landscapes, and approved a multifaceted approach that included documenting the knowledge and experience of community members, cultural groups, and forest experts through workshops. The method added to that information, the places that had inspired notable art, poetry or literature by publicly recognized artists and writers. In addition, it also recorded evidence of places in tourism brochures, guidebooks, posters and periodicals that were of high quality with broad distribution. Several mountaintops were identified for their ability to provide a significant aesthetic experience, and others as a vista feature, as well as numerous landscape features such as waterfalls, caves, gorges and tall 'old growth' or what is understood as 'old growth' forests, were identified. Of the 97 natural value place records for the Australian Alps many now have aesthetic values included in their record, thanks to the RFA research.

This multi-faceted approach was able to provide adequate data that could substantiate the value. Qualitative information from community and expert groups established the heritage value and quantitative measures (from art, literature, tourism etc) helped to determine if places met the threshold. Research by Lennon and Townley in 1998<sup>3</sup> demonstrated that poetry was a dominant form in describing landscape. People attending the workshops easily conveyed particular meanings that could not have been identified in any expert assessment using an objective 'scientific' approach.

## **The Inspirational Landscapes Project**

A new opportunity for considering the national heritage importance of inspirational landscapes recently arose when the new *national* heritage legislation<sup>4</sup> was proposed. Australia's inspirational landscapes were considered a suitable theme to pursue for national heritage recognition. On the one hand the topic is exciting and endless but on the other hand listing is a legal process that demands a clear and repeatable method. Values need to be measured to meet thresholds and to be defensible in a court of law however precise assessment methods do not sit comfortably with inspirational expressions.

In 2002, seeking to address the task of a defensible method for the inspirational values of landscapes, the Commonwealth funded a study to explore the concept of inspirational landscapes and to outline a methodology for their assessment as heritage places. Heritage consultants, Context Pty Ltd, were selected for their innovative response to the brief.

### **Project overview**

The *Inspirational Landscapes* project has been designed to better understand what makes a landscape 'inspirational', how these qualities can be understood, analysed and documented to enable important *inspirational landscapes* to be recognised and protected as heritage places at the national level.

The project is being undertaken in two parts. The first was the development of an assessment method, and the second is its application, testing and refinement. The first part of the project started by examining concepts of inspirational landscapes, exploring different views and perspectives, through the commissioning of 'perspective essays' and hosting an on-line conference. An assessment methodology was then developed, considering current methods, significance indicators and thresholds, and selecting some possible landscapes for desktop testing of the method.

To help explore the concept of 'inspirational landscapes' perspectives essays were commissioned from ten Australian artists, writers, poets, activists, and heritage professionals: Robyne Bancroft, Veronica Brady, Jamie Kirkpatrick, Jeff Malpas, Mandy Martin, Stephen Martin, Dailan Pugh, Sally Morgan, Deborah Bird Rose, Jim Sinatra and Phin Murphy. As a

collection, these essays sketch out a vast terrain of ideas about the nature of inspiration and its connection to landscape, place and culture. Together these essays constitute a remarkable body of work in their own right, contributing diverse perspectives and presenting many challenges for this project and the overall task of assessing inspirational landscapes. The essays form Volume 2 of the 2003 report and were published on the project web site for 12 months.

The essays were used to set the scene for an on-line conference *Inspirational Landscapes – Heritage Places?* held on 6-7 November, 2002. Over 300 people registered for the conference, with 234 posts made over the two days. A conference report was posted on the project web site for all those registered and forms Volume 3 of the 2003 project report.

The conference was structured around four forum sessions, with a final plenary session drawing ideas together across the themes.

*What do we mean by 'inspirational landscapes'?:* concepts, definitions, theories.

*Indigenous and colonial perceptions:* how has culture influenced our perceptions - in the past, today and looking forward?

*Practical approaches to identifying and assessing inspirational landscapes:* a forum for those who want to leap straight into methods.

*My inspirational landscape:* tell us about a place that inspires you and why.

Drawing on the ideas explored through the *perspectives essays* and the *on-line conference*, an assessment methodology was developed and is documented in Vol. 4 (2003). The report opens with a discussion of framing issues and ideas, and then presents a method for assessing inspirational landscapes which covers: National Heritage criteria, a definition of inspirational landscapes, eight indicators (and how they are linked to each criterion), thresholds, data sources and guidelines on applying the method.

During 2004-05, the second phase of the project will undertake further research to apply the method. This phase is being undertaken by Robin Crocker and Associates and includes developing an initial list of national inspirational landscapes to provide a database from which a selection of landscapes can be nominated to the National Heritage List. This was done through a survey undertaken by consultation with a range of stakeholders including

State and Territory agencies, National Trust branches, conservation and park organizations, professional organizations, academics and individuals. From the survey and research a provisional list of landscapes was developed for further study that will apply the method developed in the first phase. When the project is completed in 2005, it is expected that there will be information for nominating at least several places to the National Heritage List.

### **Seeking the essence of 'inspirational landscapes'**

Through the *perspectives essays* and the *on-line conference*, many ideas were able to be explored. Some of the most significant themes are discussed below.

#### *Defining inspirational landscapes*

'Inspirational landscapes' is a simple, but powerful concept. It combines two words that both encompass a set of diverse meanings.

As a starting point, the project brief defined inspirational landscapes as:

*essentially those places associated with positive and inspiring aesthetic or cultural perceptions of a place and experiences derived from a place. They may be discrete sections of the environment or vast expanses of landscape ... Significant stories associated with this theme may include: perceiving and celebrating landscapes in art, literature, film, song, photography and other media; conserving and fighting for the protection of landscapes; inspiring scientific ideas and understandings; inspiring bushwalking and recreation and other stories.*

This definition raised interesting questions for consideration. For example, can we identify the qualities inherent in a landscape that 'inspire'? Should we analyse or deconstruct a complex landscape to distinguish its 'inspirational features', and if so, how? Another important question was whether there are degrees of 'inspirational'? Is there a continuum between landscapes we enjoy and those that inspire, or is there some essential difference?

Fundamentally, 'inspiration' means the drawing in of breath. In this context, we are interested in a response to a place. Stephen Martin's essay<sup>5</sup> asks 'what is it that makes us stop and take a breath at a particular place or landscape? Is there something recognisable in the lie of the land

or in the way we see it? When is that catch of the mind or eye enough?' And, conversely, when is it not enough? What are the characteristics of a non-inspirational landscape?

Joy McCann suggested that inspirational landscapes reach far beyond the aesthetic response, quoting an Oxford Dictionary definition: 'inspire' means to 'fill with the urge or ability to do or feel something', while others described inspiration as a catalyst 'something that provokes us to feel or think something'. Another view is that inspirational places 'refresh one's soul', suggesting an internal cleansing rather than an inspiration to act.<sup>6</sup>

A related theme was the distinction between emotional response and 'inspiration'. In the debate on emotional response to landscape, a strong view emerged that it was necessary to consider as inspirational, places that evoked negative emotions as well as the positive, including places of horror that may inspire people to act to prevent a repeat in the future (e.g. Nazi concentration camps, killing field of Cambodia, refugee camps). On the other hand, if all emotional responses (positive or negative) could be 'inspirational', then all landscapes were potentially inspirational to someone, making the task of identifying 'inspirational landscapes' as heritage places almost impossible.<sup>7</sup> Juliet Ramsay argued that although painful events evoke an aura over a landscape that create a powerful emotional response in people, can that rightly be called 'inspirational'? Should the concept of 'inspirational landscapes' be restricted to landscapes that promote an uplifting feeling or ideas in those experiencing them.<sup>8</sup>

This was further emphasized by Haydn Washington in his response:

*When beholding a thousand year old tree crashing to earth as it was logged I have felt physically sick. This was not an inspiration! It was a strong feeling yes, but a negative feeling, one of anger and pain.*

Washington proposed that we separate out the anger and hurt that we feel at devastated landscapes (while recognising that these painful places may inspire an artists, writers and activists) from the potential transcendent moments that may be inspired by natural landscapes'.<sup>9</sup>

The term 'evocative' was also proposed as a possible way to separating out the positive and negative emotions. For example, could we say that an evocative landscape is one that evokes an emotional response, whereas an 'inspirational landscape' is one that uplifts, refreshes etc?

Even the boundary between negative and positive was recognised as blurry.

*Beauty and fear often go hand in hand. The one attracts us while the other pushes us away. This creates a 'frisson' which many of us find exciting. The so-called 'sublime' landscape often seem to come into this category.*<sup>10</sup>

Specific landscapes help underline this point:

*Cape Schanck (Victoria) ... It is an incredibly beautiful place ... The water really crashes up against the black rocks ...But it was the rocks themselves that really frightened me: dark, distorted, foreign. It reminds of the work of American horror writer H P Lovecraft. I get deeply frightened on both a physical and emotional level when I am there but it is precisely this quality that I find inspirational.*<sup>11</sup>

*I once stood on the site of a very recent landslide. The scene was absolutely still and yet all around was the evidence of rapid movement and immense power. Large trees snapped off near ground level. The sense of motion was intense. The knowledge that all life on this patch of ground was suddenly expunged. The reminder of the uncertainty of life. The dramatic and threatening power of nature is definitely an inspiring thing for me.*<sup>12</sup>

### *Nature and inspiration*

Are inspirational landscapes primarily natural places, or can 'modified' landscapes also be inspirational? Generally, the on-line conference view was that many cultural landscapes and cultural features in largely natural landscapes have the potential to be powerful and inspirational. Examples included the Newcastle waterfront with blast furnaces, steel mills belching smoke and colliers tied up along the docks; the Latrobe valley power station cooling towers with their plumes of steam; Sydney Harbour, Canberra's Lake Burley Griffin, and others. (The relevance of distinguishing between natural and cultural places was of course challenged, with the expressed view that all places have a cultural elements )

### *People and connections to place*

Another emerging theme at the on-line conference was the importance of the relationship between a person (or group of people) and a landscape, raising questions about the knowing and experiencing of places, the power of the familiar place and the newly discovered place, and the many different ways of seeing and knowing that each person brings to a landscape. The perspective essays by Sally Morgan, Robyne Bancroft and Deborah Bird Rose highlighted Indigenous perspectives on the relationship with place, and then how these may come to be shared by non-indigenous Australians. Jeff Malpas suggests that landscape is something that we experience, that we are active within and that is therefore 'inspirational' in every aspect of our lives. 'As landscapes are inspirational - as they flow into our lives - so the encounter with landscape is an encounter with that which makes us what we are'.<sup>13</sup>

But do we need to see and experience a landscape to respond to it, or can we be inspired by places that we have only 'seen' through the paintings, photographs or words created by others.

Joy McCann suggested that there is a constant interplay between 'how people remember their experiences of the landscape and how they value and perceive it'. For her, then, 'inspirational landscapes are those that fill people with a sense of connection or belonging - and this occurs through memory as well as through the senses'. Don Thomson wrote of another group within the community - farmers. His work demonstrates that farmers see landscape as a medium through which notions of 'good farming are continually redefined: that is, they are focused on the relationship and interactions between themselves and the landscape and vice versa'.<sup>14</sup>

Much about our response to place is indefinable and transcendent 'a transcendent reality that evokes a profound response as if a point of contact and ultimate unity between our without and our within'.<sup>15</sup> Haydyn Washington wrote of the 'sense of wonder' as something that peaks in a 'transcendent moment' and asks what it is about certain landscapes that lead to such moments. He suggests that part of the answer may be in the beauty of the place, the sheer joy of artistic line and form, the sense of wilderness (or freedom from human constraints and boundaries) and more.<sup>16</sup> Another idea was about the 'energy' inherent in some places, for example Findhorn in Scotland.

### *Cultural influences*

Bronwyn Hanna highlighted that 'human experiences of place are inevitably mediated by social factors: gender, ethnicity, class, sexuality, ability, age and familiarity for example. She asks:

*Does every landscape appreciation have to get bogged down in a mass of competing interpretations, and if so, how many should be sought and included? Does this question need to be addressed before the attributes of landscape can be codified (since each interpretation included will involve the recognition of different attributes found in the landscape)?<sup>17</sup>*

So how deep are the differences, and how much might be universal or at least widely shared? A specific example was offered by Sam Rando who described 'standing on the edge of the Main Range ... with an eclectic bunch of people representing all manner of interests' each saw the landscape differently - some as a place to conserve, others as a place to use or develop. But, despite this, Rando notes that the many different people who live 'within the shadows of the mountains' (and who usually have many different agendas) share a sense of spirituality and peace they identify as being found in the mountains.<sup>18</sup>

Are some landscapes intrinsically inspirational, across cultural boundaries? Katherine Gorge for example:

*recently I had the opportunity to paddle a canoe up Katherine Gorge in the Northern Territory, and I met an enormous number of people from all around the world. Some of these visitors were paddling canoes, others were on tour boats. Some had picked up a little bit of information about the place before going, others had no idea what to expect before they got there, but all of the people that I spoke to, even briefly, expressed how awe inspiring they felt the Gorge is. This was the first time that most people had been there, yet it inspired such strong, and similar, emotions and thoughts in all of them, regardless of their cultural and personal backgrounds. The gorge is also, obviously, an inspirational landscape for the traditional owners. So, is it possible for a landscape to be intrinsically inspirational?<sup>19</sup>*

Within cultures and regions, it seems likely that there will be a shared sense of which landscapes 'inspire':

*some people within a culture will share a 'common' perception of landscape - common values are, after all, what holds cultures together - at some level. Notwithstanding this, there is considerable diversity at a sub-cultural and individual scale. There are likely to be some landscapes that do, therefore, inspire us more or less universally because of a shared cultural experience ... At the end of the day, it only really matters that people have different perceptions of and values towards landscape when landscapes become contested.*<sup>20</sup>

Others pointed to the biological and evolutionary bases for aesthetics proposed by writers such as Bourassa and Appleton<sup>21</sup> seeking again to define what is universal or at least broadly-based.

An important message from the on-line conference is that defining inspirational landscapes requires an answer to the question: 'for whom?'

### **Shaping an assessment method**

The varied, emotional and heartfelt responses from the essays and on-line conference were analysed and considered within the parameters imposed by heritage assessment criteria. As listings need to be able withstand legal scrutiny, methods for assessing values must be repeatable and descriptions of values clear and succinct. It is during the process of shifting from evocative and emotional appreciation to dry, pragmatic and objective assessments that rich intangible values become elusive.

A definition for inspirational landscapes was essential. The adopted definition is:

*Inspirational landscapes are places that inspire emotional, spiritual and/or intellectual responses or actions because of their physical qualities as well as their meanings, associations, stories and history.*

*Inspirational landscapes may be:*

- *All types of landscapes, including 'natural' landscapes and 'cultural' landscapes (the focus of this project has been on natural landscapes). In other words, inspirational landscapes can include the whole spectrum of landscapes from those where the evidence of humans is minimal through to landscapes largely shaped or designed by humans.*

- *Large or small in size and scale.*
- *Land or water.*

In terms of the thorny issue about the inclusion of places with 'negative' meanings and associations (for example sites of tragic events) and landscapes that generate negative emotional responses (for example, horror on seeing a devastated landscape), it was decided to specifically exclude devastated landscapes, that is those where the emotional response may inspire repair or maintenance of that landscape (that is, to change it back to how it was before the devastation occurred). However, places with negative 'meanings' and associations are not necessarily excluded, particularly when a negative association relates to the threatening power of landscape features.

In order to present an objective assessment and also cover the scope of the understanding of inspirational landscapes generated from the previous stages of the study, eight clear 'indicators' were developed. These were discussed, debated, tested with place examples and further refined at a workshop of experts. The indicators act as signposts that help identify and define values that could determine a significant inspirational landscape. Some of the indicators relate to inherent values and some to acquired values. They were developed as an analytical framework that can assist both nominators of landscapes in describing values and heritage assessors in determining levels of significance. In the Assessment Method Report each of the indicators (listed below) is discussed in relation to each relevant criterion, examples of landscapes are provided, thresholds are defined and potential data sources are listed.

1. **Powerful landscapes:** landscapes that create a powerful emotional response usually due to their exceptional features.
2. **Stories:** landscapes that contain significant cultural stories (histories) that illuminate understanding and appreciation of the place and society) and inspire response.
3. **Uncommon landscapes:** landscapes with uncommon and unusual qualities within an Australian context that have inspired strong emotional responses.
4. **Defining images and creative expressions:** landscapes that have inspired defining images and creative expressions that have shaped national perceptions and appreciation of a particular landscape or type of landscape.

5. **Inspired action:** landscapes that have inspired an action, change or turning point that has been important in the course of Australia's history.
6. **Contemplative landscapes:** natural landscapes that are acknowledged as providing important opportunities for contemplation, spiritual reflection or refreshment of the human spirit.
7. **Cultural practices:** landscapes that are the primary inspiration of significant or defining cultural practices at a national scale.
8. **Sacred landscapes:** landscapes that are acknowledged as inspiring spiritual insights and as the source for ongoing spiritual practice.<sup>22</sup>

These indicators are being applied to guide the selection and assessment of the heritage values of inspirational landscapes.

## **In conclusion**

The Inspirational Landscapes Project has demonstrated that mountains take a strong hold on many people's hearts. One of our on-line conference forums asked people to write about an inspirational landscapes. Many places and themes emerged, but mountains topped the list: Mt Warning, Mt Buffalo, Gariwerd (Grampians), Mt Speculation, the Brindabellas, and even Mt Ararat - Noah's mountain. Some mountains were named for their beauty; some for their intimacy and yet vastness; some for what we know and understand about them; some for their atmosphere, energy, danger and power (a sublime beauty).

As the second phase of the Inspirational Landscapes Project progresses, it is heartening to see many of Australia's mountain landscapes appearing on the list of inspirational landscapes, corroborating the inherent understanding of their undeniably high value to Australians. The inspirational importance of mountains to most Australians is a story that has no beginning, it has always existed. In seeking to document, classify, compare and evaluate abstract qualities, the emotional flavours and personal meanings are inevitable reduced. We recognize, with concern, that this study may reinforce the idea that some landscapes are more important than others and that formal assessment is needed before they can be considered to have important values. What we hope this study will do is achieve an approach that can survive legal and scientific scrutiny and create a process that can set a better model for arguing for these values.

The challenging quest of this study and its results should assist many in validating intangible qualities of mountains and all landscapes.

## References:

Appleton, J. *The experience of landscape*. London: John Wiley & Sons Pty Ltd, 1975.

Bourassa, S. 'Towards a theory of landscape aesthetics', *Landscape and Urban Planning*, 15 241 –252, Elsevier Science Publishers B.V. 1988.

Commonwealth of Australia, *Australian Heritage Commission Act 1975*.

Commonwealth of Australia *The Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act*, Attorney Generals Department, 1999.

Context Pty Ltd *Inspirational landscapes, Volumes 1-4*, a report prepared for the Australian Heritage Commission, 2003.

Lennon, J. and Townley, M. *Identification and assessment of National Estate aesthetic values, South East Queensland Bioregion*. Report for the CRA/RFA Steering Committee, 1998.

Ramsay, J. and Paraskevopoulos, J. *More than meets the eye: Identifying and assessing aesthetic value*. Australian Heritage Commission, Technical Paper, 1993.

UNESCO, *Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage 1972*.

Washington, H. *A Sense of Wonder*, Rylestone: Nullo Books, 2002.

---

<sup>1</sup> The results are outlined in the National Estate Reports prepared for each RFA.

<sup>2</sup> Ramsay, J. and Paraskevopoulos, J. (1993) *More Than Meets the Eye: Identifying and Assessing Aesthetic Value*. Report of the aesthetic Value Workshop held at the University of Melbourne 27 October 1993.

- 
- <sup>3</sup> Lennon, J. and Townley, M. (1998) Identification and Assessment of National Estate Aesthetic Values, South East Queensland Bioregion. Report for the CRA/RFA Steering Committee
- <sup>4</sup> In January 2004, the amendments to the Commonwealth's *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation (EPBC) Act 1999* were passed to include legislation for a new regime of Commonwealth heritage. The Australian Heritage Commission Act was repealed.
- <sup>5</sup> Stephen Martin: *Our Landscapes*. Essay prepared for the project
- <sup>6</sup> Joy McCann; L. Hayes: Forum 1 - To be inspired?; Juliet Ramsay: Forum 1 - Are modified landscapes inspirational?
- <sup>7</sup> L. Hayes: Forum 1 - Are modified landscapes inspirational?
- <sup>8</sup> Julie Ramsay: Forum 1 - Are modified landscapes inspirational?
- <sup>9</sup> Haydyn Washington: Forum 1 - Are modified landscapes inspirational?
- <sup>10</sup> Christain Clare Robertson: My Inspirational Landscape - Scary Places
- <sup>11</sup> Libby Riches: My Inspirational Landscape - Scary Places
- <sup>12</sup> Geoff Hunt: My Inspirational Landscape - Scary Places
- <sup>13</sup> Jeff Malpas - as quoted in Forum 1
- <sup>14</sup> Dr Don Thomson, Forum 1
- <sup>15</sup> Neil Coup: Forum 1 - To be inspired?
- <sup>16</sup> Haydyn Washington: Forum 1 - To be inspired?
- <sup>17</sup> Bronwyn Hanna: Forum 1 - To be inspired?
- <sup>18</sup> Sam Rando: Forum 1 - To be inspired?
- <sup>19</sup> Niccole: Forum 1 - To be inspired?
- <sup>20</sup> Don Thomson: Forum 1 - To be inspired?
- <sup>21</sup> S. Bourassa *Towards a theory of landscape aesthetics*; Appleton (1975) *Experience of landscape*
- <sup>22</sup> The indicators are more fully described in the report by Context (2003) *Inspirational Landscapes, Volume 4 Assessment Method*