

Rural Heritage Practice: The Burra Charter in the Bush

1999 Australia ICOMOS National Conference
27-29 November, 1999

Day 3 - Working with Rural Communities

Communities - Parochial, passionate, committed and ignored

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Communities demand our attention. They are the local experts. They are passionate and often parochial. They care about their patch and they are there for the long haul - well after the practitioners have moved on.

One of the challenges in heritage practice - and in many areas of public policy - is developing the skills and resources needed to work with communities.

Getting community involvement into the heritage mainstream has proved to be a challenge. Working with communities is still on the fringe. It's rare and undervalued. Everyone thinks they have the skills to do it, but few actually do.

In fact, those heritage practitioners who have specialised in community involvement are often working at the cutting edge of practice. The community involvement methods we use in heritage practice are often more innovative than those used within the broader framework of local area planning.

Why involve the community?

Working with communities is not just a technical task. It's about values - personal and shared - and therefore about ethics.

The *Community Participation Handbook*¹ states two bold reasons for seeking community participation:

1. **It is ethical:** In a democratic society, those whose livelihoods, environments and lives are at stake should be consulted and involved in the decisions which affect them directly
2. **It is pragmatic:** support for programs and policies often depends on people's willingness to assist the process, and if planners don't involve citizens, citizens will involve themselves.

From these two points, a whole framework of principles and practices can be teased out.

Ethics

Ethics translate values into actions. Ethics are situationally determined and highly specific - the right action in one situation may be wrong in another. The driving force behind ethics is to do the right thing all the time, not necessarily the same thing all the time.

Ethics are stated behaviourally and set boundaries for appropriate behaviour. Broad ethical positions that may influence our behaviour when working with communities could be as simple as:

- avoid harming others
- be accountable for your actions.

Ethics are important. The ethical base of community involvement processes need to be aligned with those of the participants (including our own). It should be expected that these ethics and therefore the agreed principles of community involvement could vary from community to community.

The question of ethics and the ways they underpin community processes may be most easily seen when working in cross cultural situations. Two quick examples which will be familiar to many:

- The Australian Archaeological Association has developed a Code of Ethics which details the principles and conduct of its members in relation to Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Amongst other things, this document acknowledges the indigenous ownership of cultural heritage knowledge and the primacy of heritage places for indigenous people. In heritage work, and in wider areas of interaction with indigenous communities, we accept that the most appropriate process and outcomes have to be worked through with the communities themselves.
- At the recent ICOMOS and AusHeritage conference, 'Australian Heritage Professionals Working in Asia', the point was repeatedly made that, when working in Asian societies, we need to look carefully at how to best apply our professional practice to the needs, values and capacities of the community.

Public Policy

Public policy is a useful way to spell out ethical positions. The City of Adelaide's *Communication and Consultation Charter*² has the following 11 points.

When the City of Adelaide communicates with you, consults with you, or does both, we will:

1. Be clear about the subject and the purpose of our contact with you
2. Use clear and suitable language
3. Use different methods for different situations
4. Use processes that are open and accountable
5. Listen with an open mind and treat you with respect
6. Allow sufficient time and a range of ways for you to respond
7. Identify those who are likely to be affected and talk with them
8. Always give a contact name and number
9. Have fair and clear conflict resolution and complaints processes
10. Tell you what happened and why
11. Continue to learn to improve our approach.

Embedded in this Charter is a strong ethical position related to democracy and active citizenship.

Pragmatics

There are many pragmatic reasons for community involvement. For example:

- **Communities know a lot** - whether its from traditional knowledge and information handed down from generation to generation, or from long association with an area, or from their own research.

- **Community aspirations and needs are important in formulating policy and taking action.** Open community-based processes mean that aspirations and needs can be discussed, different perspectives and conflicts can be revealed, and possibly resolved.
- **To build support for a public policy or action** - or at least find out that there is no support (and sometimes there won't be)!
- **Create wider community awareness** – involving people is a good way of developing their knowledge and understanding, and of sharing information more widely throughout a community.
- **Building shared ownership** - involving people can help build shared ownership of a project or its outcomes, an important task when people have been disempowered.
- **Discover and discuss conflict** – difference and conflicting views and values need to be talked about if an agreed position is to be found.

And, for heritage practitioners, assessing the social significance of heritage places requires interaction with associated communities to determine its social value.

In fact, many of these pragmatic reasons are also based on the ethical position already outlined above.

Climbing Arnstein's ladder

Most community involvement models are based on the idea that government is running the show, and that it is up to government to decide how, when and why to involve the community.³

Thirty years ago, Sherry Arnstein⁴ wrote a classic article that proposed a "ladder of participation", placing citizen control at the top of the ladder and manipulation at the bottom.

It presents a bleak, but realistic picture of the degree to which power is shared in community involvement processes. Its ethical base is again that of participatory democracy, but most of the ladder reflects little or no active participation (beyond the ballot box anyway).

Arnstein's Ladder of Participation

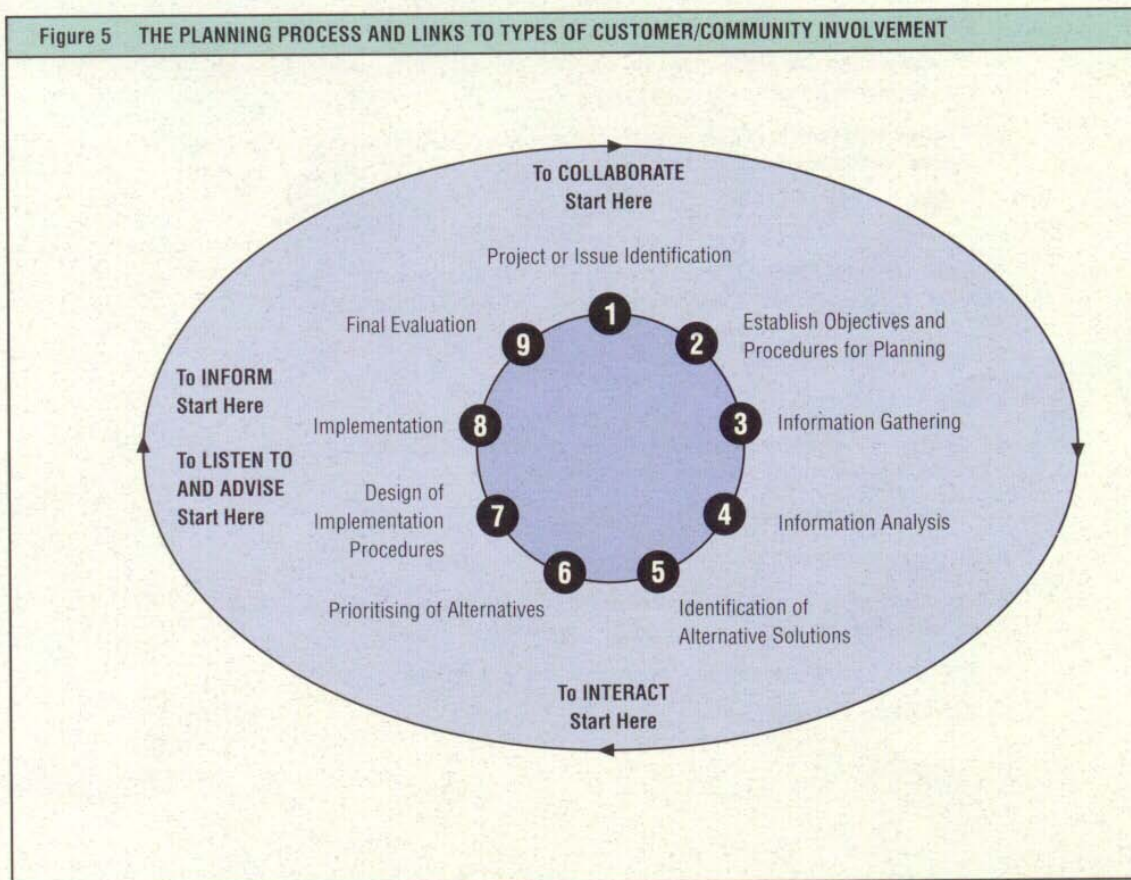
Citizen control
Delegated power
Partnership
Placation
Consultation
Informing
Therapy
Manipulation

Climbing Arnstein's ladder is hard work. There are many snakes down which to slide! For example:

- Lack of support from government for the whole idea
- Cynicism from communities where their past contributions have been ignored
- Lack of resources, time and skills.

A simpler version has been developed by Melbourne Water⁵. It is perhaps more realistic than Arnstein's ladder because it recognises that government is unlikely to go higher than Arnstein's partnership or perhaps delegation rungs.

<i>Degree of involvement in decision-making</i>	<i>Influence of the community</i>
Collaborate	Jointly agreeing to the decision
Interact	Having an influence over the decision
Listen to and advise	Being heard before the decision
Inform	Knowledge about the decision



Another version of this diagram (above) illustrates the link between the degree of community influence desired and when involvement should start.

These are useful tools to help in both the design of community involvement processes, and as a basis to review what happened against what was intended. It is worth emphasising that these steps or stages do not have hard and clear boundaries – more like points on a sliding scale. Also, in our experience of working with communities, processes that start out with an intention to ‘inform’, can lead to processes to ‘listen and advise’, ‘interact’ or even ‘collaborate’ in response to community reaction. Community responses can sometimes reveal the need to think again, reconsider, take a step back, and - while this may initially feel like things are ‘going off the rails’ – it can lead to better and more sustainable outcomes.

If our commitment is to participatory democracy, then in our practice we need to climb Arnstein’s ladder – and match our practices to our ethics. While we believe this is true for most processes which have outcomes which could affect people, it is even more important

when applied to cultural heritage practices. This is because the nature of our work inevitably involves the creative, technical and social expressions of groups of people or their ancestors, and so is inextricably bound up in the aspirations, beliefs and knowledge of communities.

Snakes & ladders: stories from recent projects

Much of our work is with communities and many common themes and issues emerge from this work.

Control and letting go

Much of what happens once a community involvement process has started is inevitably “open for negotiation”. While governments at all levels often want to limit the scope of community involvement to the “issue at hand”, this isn't always necessary, appropriate or a good strategy for success. Nor does it always work! It may be necessary to start with the issues that are important to the community, and then work toward the issues important to the practitioner or organisation initiating the process.

At a community heritage workshop in northern NSW, Chris Johnston found herself in front of an angry crowd (a not uncommon experience!). They were sceptical about the State government's reasons for calling the workshop. But worse, they felt let down by promises to consult on forest management that hadn't eventuated. The group had planned to yell for a while and then walk out, to announce to the waiting media that the whole process was a sham.

There had been no warning of these issues, and the department had sent along an officer with little experience in public consultation. As the workshop started, he was drawn into defending the department - defending the indefensible is never a good approach! He was doing his best to keep control of the meeting, but that was not achievable.

The alternative was to give control to the whole meeting, allowing those present to take responsibility for its shape and content. Over several hours this enabled the issues to be clearly articulated, and some possible solutions worked through. It was over lunch that the planned walk-out was revealed, and by then everyone was committed to staying to make sure the issues and solutions were accurately recorded for communication back to the department.

The outcome, after negotiation with the department and the community, was a series of workshops to address the real issues of concern - the scope of the proposed forest resource and significance studies. These workshops were frank and fruitful, marked by a new sense of trust in the process and those facilitating it.

Control in community involvement processes is illusory. It is those present who decide who holds the power. At the very least they can walk out, leaving you without a community to consult. By recognising that participation is freely chosen, control becomes irrelevant.

Holding the space

In many community involvement projects, the most important task for the facilitator is to open a space within which people can share ideas and work together. Creating a safe space sounds simple but can be complex.⁶

For example, we are currently working with an indigenous community on a management plan for a place with enormous indigenous and historic values. The community had lobbied for several years to have a plan prepared, and they have finally achieved government funding. We have been contracted by the government agency, not the community, but our

commitment (openly stated to our client) is to get a community-agreed plan and implementation process.

We saw the main problem as being how to get all of the key elders together. There is conflict within this community about the past management of this place, and there are other more pressing issues for the community to deal with. Separate meetings were tried, but had limited success.

A newsletter to all community members was sent out as a way of getting a simple message about the management plan out as widely as possible. The response was mixed, but mostly positive. In a second newsletter, an open meeting was called, and got a good response. People unexpectedly came together to give us a clear direction.

What had changed? For us as outsiders, nothing appeared different. None of the conflicts had been resolved. But somehow, a space for fruitful discussions emerged.

One of the things that we think helped in this case was a willingness on the part of the commissioning agency to allow the timeline for the project to take its own course. But there are sometimes forces at work in communities that we, as outsiders, cannot be privy to.

Conflict is common in most communities, and its important to be able to create spaces and processes in which people who usually oppose each other can work together and find common ground.

Loggers and greenies have worked together at the community heritage workshops as part of the Regional Forest Agreement work. For us, it's a welcome surprise how often this workshop framework has created a space in which mutual interest emerges instead of conflict.

And, sometimes the spaces that we find safe, aren't so safe or easy for everyone from the community. In our work in the Upper Mersey valley (Tasmania) we proposed meetings in the public hall. That was fine for some people as it was clearly "their place". But for others, a kitchen table meeting was better. The fishermen insisted the meeting be held while out fishing at night.

Bending with the wind

Most government processes start with a lot of non-negotiables. It's about limiting the influence of the community and ensuring that government keeps control. And it's one of the most common snakes to infest Arnstein's ladder.

Sometimes, clear non-negotiables are very helpful is focusing discussions on what is possible. For example, consultation with indigenous communities in Victoria's North East for the Regional Forest Agreement started with a fundamental non-negotiable - "that the RFA will be developed". But sometimes, clinging to what seem to be non-negotiables can stop the process.

In this case, a workshop with Aboriginal communities was organised to discuss a site prediction model and its use in forest management processes. Although some early consultation meetings had been held, it became clear at the workshop that the RFA process, and what was and was not negotiable within it was not well understood by the participants. There was little basis for discussing the detail of the workshop agenda, and it was essentially abandoned. In this project, the government representatives quickly recognised that their expectations for the workshop were not right, and that the process could not move as quickly as originally planned. The workshop then became an "issues identification" session, with the community representatives deciding when next to meet and what to work through next.

The process that emerged was more organic than originally envisaged, shaped by the emerging views of the indigenous communities. Each meeting shaped the subsequent meeting, and the community had some direction over how the process unfolded. As is often the case, there were many issues that indigenous communities wanted to raise that were outside the scope of the RFA.

The solution that emerged was to create an Aboriginal Community Liaison Committee that would allow indigenous communities to raise issues of concern regarding Aboriginal sites protection on many areas of public land – not just State Forests.

This project is still being completed, and its outcomes are relatively modest, with many unresolved issues still ‘on the table’. However, there is room for some cautious optimism that the closer relationship and more regular communication between Aboriginal communities and public land managers can lead to better management outcomes for all concerned. Essentially, this project demonstrates that a community can change the intended outcome, achieving a better result for all. And, for the Commonwealth government representatives, the learnings from this work have already been carried forward into their negotiations with indigenous communities in other Victorian regions.

Giving back

The heritage field is full of discoverers. We seem to all like to be the one who discovered the place, who first assessed its significance, who got it listed.

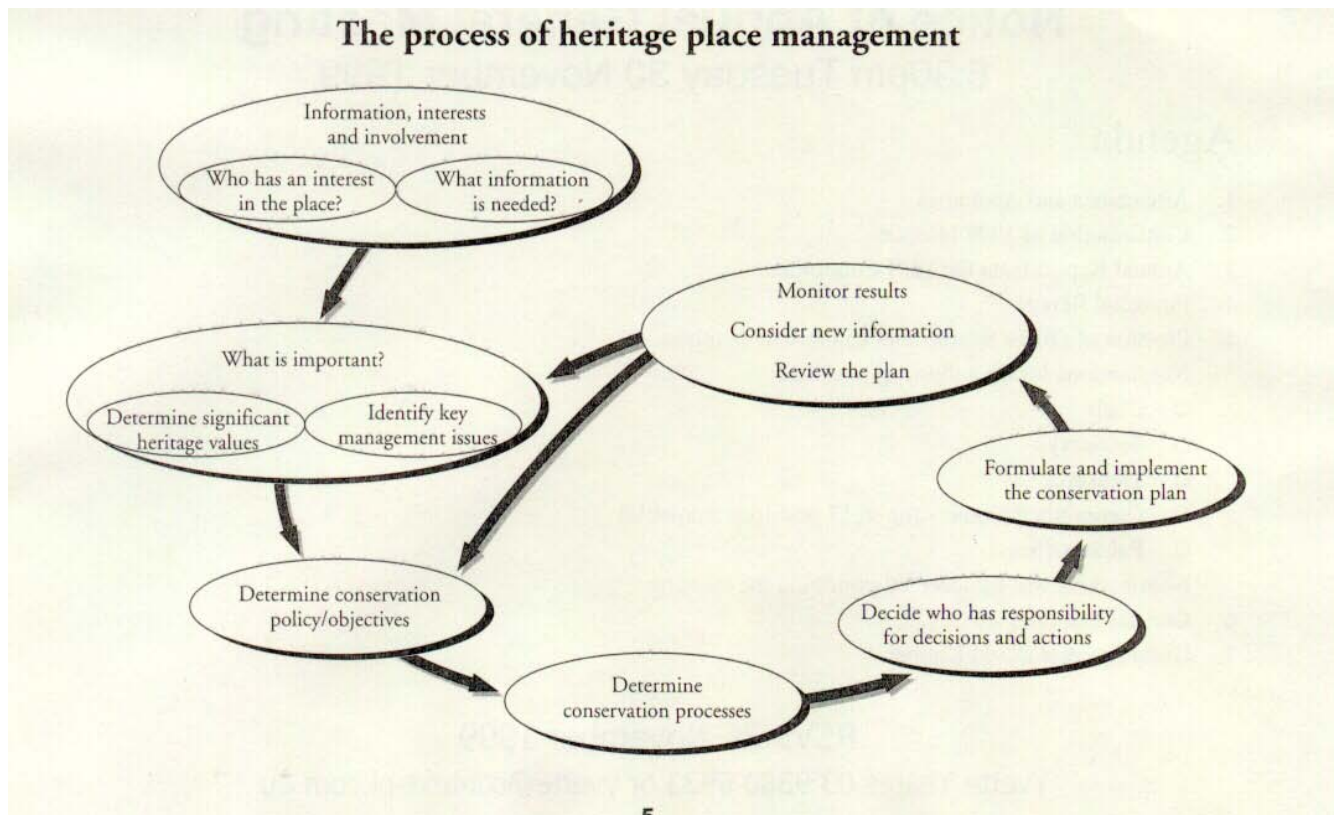
But the places we keep discovering are not ours to discover. Often we find out about them through someone else - someone who has decided to trust us with information about their precious place.

East Gippsland Shire, with NEGP support, has initiated a project designed to take the results of the community heritage workshops (East Gippsland RFA) back to the community as the basis for a community heritage plan for the Shire.

Because of the size of the Shire and the remoteness of many communities, it is very important that local people be resourced to address heritage issues locally – from identification through to management. The project involves training and support for people in selected local areas – as pilots for extending the approach across the whole Shire. Each case study has a paid local coordinator, and expert advice is available from consultants. There is funding for costs such as travel and copying, and access to Shire facilities including as office space and computer/internet access. In this way, local heritage studies will be done for the first time in Omeo, Lakes Entrance and Mallacoota.

Communities doing it for themselves

The Australian Heritage Commission's guide *Protecting local heritage places: a guide for communities* combines the usual heritage processes of identifying, listing, protecting and managing heritage places with a "do-it-yourself" guide to getting organised, involving others, planning your attack, and finding support.



The guide was developed through an extensive national consultation process, demonstrating the benefits of seeking ideas from those actively involved at a grass-roots level.

One of the gaps in the Guide is on taking urgent action when a place is threatened – either the bulldozer at the gate, a threatening process or a relentless planning process – leading to potential doom for the place. These issues arise commonly for community groups.

Time will tell how well this guide meets the needs of its audience. As the first of its kind in Australia, it is certainly addressing an important need.

Lessons for the learning

Each time you work with a community, there's a lot to be learned. It's a bit tough and often very confronting. You are out there with your stated values and ethics, open to be judged and found wanting. What are the most important lessons?

- To be trusted, you have to be willing to trust in others.
- Control is an illusion
- Be true to yourself and your own values.
- Honesty is essential
- Make all the non-negotiables clear at the start, and then be prepared to negotiate them
- Don't presume that your process will or should limit people's direct/political actions.

- Be flexible - go with the flow
- Respect people's rights
- Be prepared to commit yourself.
- Don't treat people like a tap – able to be turned off or on at your whim
- Resource the community so it can participate - even travel money helps
- All community involvement methods have strength and weaknesses. Use them wisely.
- Build your own skills constantly.

And if you want to have a disaster on your hands, we'd recommend:

- Neglect key stakeholders
- Ignore issues that are important to the community
- Make the timelines impossibly short
- Provide information that is unintelligible to those you want to understand it
- Create false expectations by being unclear about the extent of community input that is possible
- Behave defensively or secretively
- Squeeze every bit of goodwill out of participants but give nothing back.

The revised Burra Charter⁷ at last recognises that those with a special association with a place should be able to participate in the conservation, interpretation and management of that place. This is a small step really, but an important one nevertheless.

The next challenge is to develop guidelines for community involvement in heritage practice, and to adequately resource this work.

References

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The Burra Charter (The Australia ICOMOS Charter for Places of Cultural Significance)
(November 1999) Australia ICOMOS, Articles 12 and 26.3.

¹ Sarkissian, W. & Perlgut, D. (1986) *The Community Participation Handbook: resources for public involvement in the planning process*, Impacts Press, p. 1.

² Wendy Sarkissian, Director Sarkissian Associate Planners; Angela Hazebroek, Principal Planner, Hassell Pty Ltd

³ There are community involvement practices that are based on ideas of joint discovery (eg. strategic questioning) and participatory research (eg action research). A wider review of community involvement in heritage practice in Australia is underway. It will look at these and other models. For more information go to the Australian Heritage Commission's web site (<http://www.environment.gov.au/heritage> - look under News)

⁴ Arnstein, S. (1969) "A ladder of citizen participation", *Journal of the American Institute of Planners*, Vol. 35, No. 4, pp. 216-224.

⁵ Whately, R. (1993) *Working with our customers and the community*, Corporate Communications Group, Melbourne Water.

⁶ There is a method known as Open Space Technology that is designed around some profound and important ideas about opening and holding safe a shared working space. A good reference is Harrison Owen (1997) *Open Space Technology; A User's Guide*, Berrett-Koehler Publishers Inc, San Francisco.

⁷ *The Burra Charter (The Australia ICOMOS Charter for Places of Cultural Significance)* (November 1999) Australia ICOMOS, Articles 12 and 26.3.