

COMMUNITY AND CULTURAL VALUES: THE UPPER MERSEY VALLEY AND THE TASMANIAN WILDERNESS WORLD HERITAGE AREA

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ABSTRACT

The upper Mersey valley, largely within the Tasmanian Wilderness World Heritage Area (WHA), represents deep affection, sense of place, and a sense of history for local communities. With World Heritage declaration, these people were “locked out” and left out of decision-making. This paper covers two approaches to these problems: an upper Mersey cultural values study, and recent Tasmanian Parks and Wildlife Service responses that changed WHA planning prescriptions and the culture of management. The upper Mersey study incorporated important variations from Australian Heritage Commission methods for social and aesthetic values assessment. The differences are explained in terms of doing full justice to local values and place perceptions (and historical values). Secondly, the paper analyses the WHA’s two management plans (1992, 1999), and finds a major turnaround in accepting cultural values. Tasmania’s parks are beginning to recognise an expanded mandate, shifting the focus from the exclusively natural. Important questions remain about how cultural values will be understood, valued, and integrated into management of large-scale natural areas.

THE UPPER MERSEY

In the past, mountains were a place apart, valued for their special resources but away from dwelling places. This place, the upper Mersey Valley, is one such example where people’s experiences, work and endeavour in the mountains created special and ongoing attachments. It is also a place where new reserve boundaries and the WHA have affected nearby communities.

Through the initiative of Jim Russell and Simon Cubit, a project was developed to explore the cultural associations of the upper Mersey Valley. This valley is located high within

and adjoining Tasmania's Central Plateau. The project received funding from the National Estate Grants Program. Its primary purpose was to assess the cultural values of the upper Mersey using methods derived from those used throughout Australia in the Australian Heritage Commission's regional assessment of forested areas (e.g. Australian Heritage Commission & Department of Conservation and Natural Resources, Victoria, 1994), but with the aim of closely involving the community in understanding values and assessing significance.

The methods used in the regional assessments involved community heritage workshops to provide information on social significance, and a combination of these workshops, forest critics workshops and analysis of art and tourism images, for aesthetic significance (e.g. Tasmanian Public Land Use Commission, 1997). Prior to starting the project, the place was well known to one of the team, Simon Cubit, who had long family associations with the region and had recently spent time investigating the history and places that provided evidence of that history.

The upper Mersey Valley has been used for thousands of years. Aboriginal Tasmanians made seasonal forays at least 10,000 years ago and more regularly around 3,000 years ago as the climate became warmer. Vegetation patterns, especially open grassy clearings surrounded by forest, are likely to be remnants of Aboriginal burning that were copied by the wave of settlers from the 1820s.

These settlers used the open grasslands for grazing with different families taking up areas within the upper Mersey. As the land to the north around Mole Creek and Liena was set aside for freehold farming, those settlers started to use the upper Mersey Valley and other parts of the Central Plateau. From the 1880s hunting for the export fur trade assumed great importance with people snaring wallaby and possum in the Valley throughout winter. An evocative Tasmanian film, *The Tale of Ruby Rose* (1989), presents some of the hardships faced by snarers and their partners during snowbound winters.

After the Second World War, development of hydro-electric dams and forestry again changed this landscape. Roads encouraged others to visit to enjoy its remarkable beauty, to walk and to fish the many lakes of the Plateau. Recognition of its environmental significance resulted in National Parks and WHA (1988-89) designations.

UNDERSTANDING CULTURAL VALUES

The project aimed to understand the cultural values of the communities with close associations with the upper Mersey Valley, that is, those who lived locally and those who had visited over many years. Of the cultural values recognised by the Australian Heritage Commission (Register of the National Estate Criteria), two are based on expressed community values - aesthetic value (criterion E), 'importance in exhibiting particular aesthetic characteristics valued by a community or cultural group' and social value (criterion G), 'strong or special associations with a particular community or cultural group for social, cultural or spiritual reasons'. Both require an understanding of the values held by the particular community for whom the place is being assessed. That is, we were not looking at generic values or values held across the Australian community. Rather our task was to distinguish the values of these specific communities, and to use these as our assessment criteria. In doing this we felt that we were breaking new ground.

Our approach was to hold informal gatherings with people who shared an interest in common. That meant identifying "communities of interest" and, with the help of key people in each "community", gathering a group together to discuss their values, make a preliminary list of places and document their significance.

The areas of community interest identified were: hunting, fishing, cattle grazing, bushwalking, horse riding, forestry/sawmilling and huts. Recognising that these interests largely reflected adult male pursuits, we also held groups for women who regularly visited and used the upper Mersey Valley, women who knew about the upper Mersey but were not regular users or visitors, and school children at Mole Creek Primary Schools (Grade 6). We also met with public land managers whose work took them into the upper Mersey. We expected that by working with each group separately, the different and distinct layers of meaning and value would be more clearly revealed.

Following these meetings, we distilled these values into a set of criteria and checked them back with the communities involved. As well, we were able to present all of the material from the small discussion groups to the whole community as part of an exhibition in the Mole Creek Memorial Hall in June 1997 and this proved a great talking point.

The "communities of interest" were self defined with participants identified by a key person within that "community". Each group met at a place of their choosing, often at the

Mole Creek Memorial Hall. Much of the group's discussion revolved around defining the place itself and mapping its boundaries for each person. Often time was spent reflecting on the place, describing it to us and creating powerful visual images through the telling of stories - often we felt as though we had magically moved to the Valley and were no longer sitting in the hall. Large maps of the Valley were marked to show the boundary of the place, the areas that people had used or continued to use, travel routes and other known features. A second map recorded all the places of importance. Collective discussion revealed which places were of the greatest importance to the identity of this "community of interest". Perceived threats were also noted.

One of the most important results of the work was in understanding what the terms social significance and aesthetic significance might mean within these "communities of interest".

For social significance, the following specific values were identified.

A different way of life: A special place, beyond civilisation and not like "home", and yet a place that welcomes you back. It's a different way of life. A challenging environment; familiar but never safe.

Symbols: Places that symbolise what this community stands for and cares about.

Bringing history alive: Places that bring history alive because of what we know about the past and because of our own experiences there. Some places recall generations of people who've lived and worked there.

Stories and legends: Place names and the places themselves help recall stories and legends about individuals and families, past events, tragedies and exploits. These stories are written in the landscape for those who know where to look.

Landmarks and stopping places: These mark the journey into the Mersey Valley. They are at the heart of knowing where you are – and even who you are. It's almost a spiritual journey.

Lookout points: Places where you can see beyond – to see the vastness of the landscape and to see what is happening elsewhere.

Familiar and favourite places: Places that are or have been part of our lives over many years; the places you come back to time and time again.

Personal places: Places special to me that perhaps no one else knows about.

And for aesthetic values:

Landmarks of beauty and grandeur: Features that are beautiful or imposing, and generally well known locally.

Lookouts and views: Places where people respond strongly to beauty or rugged grandeur. Views can be beautiful, breathtaking.

Natural features in a landscape: Individual places or elements in the valley or on the plateau that are particularly beautiful.

Wild landscapes, with their plants and animals: A landscape that strikes you as beautiful, impressive, or powerful. Some may be particularly evocative of the upper Mersey as a whole – a place of extraordinary beauty and wild but, at times, forbidding grandeur. Some people are particularly struck by places where they may encounter wild animals.

Huts: Some are especially evocative of emotional responses to what a hut provides – warmth, shelter, and a welcoming atmosphere.

Special, unusual features: Some built structures in the landscape are widely known in the community and remarked on because they include unusual, striking features.

Discovery: Features and landscapes of the upper Mersey are so many, varied, and changeable in mood that there is always more to be discovered.

The results were integrated with historical values and a series of places identified and proposed for the Register of the National Estate (Russell et al., 1998). The process of understanding the values of each “community of interest” and their places provided a

new approach and deepened our understanding of the significance of the places within these specific communities and also across the broader local community. Extending the process to include those who were not regular users of the upper Mersey Valley, but who “knew” the valley through local culture and stories revealed to us how such knowledge and deep attachment to places is passed on through a community. A parallel project by Dr Joan Knowles focussed on traditional practices, i.e. activities undertaken over many years by non-Indigenous Tasmanian communities in a range of places on the Central Plateau and around Macquarie Harbour (Western Tasmania). She found that for each of the communities of interest within particular localities, there was a common mechanism of attachment to areas of land based on what she described as ‘secular rituals’ that involved journeys into the ‘liminal space of the bush’ (Knowles, 1997, p. 57). The development of these attachments results in those communities of interest seeking a role in management. Both approaches demonstrated the important need to recognise diverse and layered values in these highly complex places. Some of the values are contested and maybe in conflict, requiring new approaches to be developed for management, but the first challenge facing the WHA planners was to establish a new culture of management that demonstrated inclusiveness.

MANAGING FOR CULTURAL VALUES

The history of the WHA is tied in its origins to the dams debates – the Lake Pedder and the Franklin campaigns to save the landscapes of South West and Western Tasmania – with one outcome being that the wilderness catch-cry had swamped the claims of certain local communities like those in the Mole Creek area. The resulting “lock out”, expressed in the first WHA management plan (Parks and Wildlife Service 1992), meant that many “traditional practices” were stopped or severely regulated. The targets turned out to be some of the strong expressions of attachment to places that the anthropologist Joan Knowles was to identify later in her parallel project. The WHA plan’s actions included closing several bush camps, forced cessation of seasonal grazing and burning, restrictions on horseriding, hunting, and fishing, and general discouragement of a community sense of ownership of huts, stockyards and tracks.

The sense of loss was often clearly expressed by Mole Creek and other participants in the upper Mersey study, too. Women, for example, were strong in their belief that the

community ties to the mountains and valleys, involving passing practice and knowledge on to the next generation, would wither in the face of the WHA prescriptions (Russell et al., 1998).

The years following the 1992 WHA plan saw intensive lobbying on behalf of the locals, lobbying which led to the Knowles project and, perhaps indirectly, to the upper Mersey study. In the meantime, wide-ranging discussions had been taking place both in Australia and overseas during the 1990s on the relationships between wilderness and cultural landscapes, and on cultural values in natural areas in general (e.g. Jane Lennon and Associates, 1999). The ascendancy and exclusivity of wilderness was under challenge from a number of authors (see account in Russell and Jambrecina, 2002). One expression of a groundswell in this change in thinking was a Policy Statement from the Australian Conservation Foundation (1999), 'Wilderness and Indigenous Cultural Landscapes in Australia', which formally recognised the prior occupancy by Aborigines of the nation's lands now believed to be "natural" or "wilderness", and pledged working towards maintenance of the connections between Aboriginal communities and land. The pressure from communities in Tasmania, the local findings by Joan Knowles, and the broader intellectual climate were all conducive to taking stock of past management in the light of experience and fresh insights: both a 1997 draft and the finally adopted 1999 WHA management plan incorporated a new approach to accommodating concerns from a diversity of communities (Parks and Wildlife Service, 1997; 1999).

Some restrictions were eased, including a provision for companion dogs in parts of the WHA under controlled conditions, and the Community Huts Partnership was established. These were moves to bring members of some communities back into the WHA. In the upper Mersey study, participants in the bushwalking "community of interest" discussions were strong in their protests about WHA regulations, mentioning in particular the role of the companion dog alongside the lone walker who might spend several days or more at a time on the Central Plateau.

The Parks and Wildlife Service measures in the 1999 plan involved a new recognition in Tasmania – that cultural values were to be understood not only in terms of fabric associated with historic events, but with practices expressive of attachments to places that communities were committed to maintaining (Russell and Jambrecina, 2002). Models for community involvement in parks exist in many places and have preceded Tasmania's

awakening to the possibilities of community stewardship of reserves, but not always in what have been regarded as natural areas. For instance, Parks Canada, owner of the historic 202km Rideau Canal between Ottawa and Kingston, found that in order to successfully manage the waterway, cooperation would have to be sought from the many people living in a 4700km catchment, including the two cities, many regional centres, and rural areas (Russell and Jambrecina, 2002). Such models suggest a departure from the strictly natural designation for some parks and reserves, or parts of them, in favour of the IUCN category of Protected Landscape/Seascape, involving safeguarding people-land interactions (IUCN *Guidelines for Protected Area Management*, cited in Phillips, 1998).

CONCLUSION

In effect, Tasmania is exploring a new model of protected area management, one that is finding its first expression in the mountains and valleys of the WHA. The upper Mersey study, as well as the earlier findings of Joan Knowles (reported in 1997 whilst the former study was a work in progress) laid the local intellectual basis that demonstrated community attachments. The upper Mersey project tried some new ways of assessing cultural values, and collectively the studies were successful in uncovering multiple values of place. For its part, the Parks and Wildlife Service has responded to community disaffection, but the efficacy of the new plan depends on what is done to implement it. The WHA Planner stated in mid-2002 that the Parks Service had moved forward in a number of areas (such as Aboriginal interpretation, Aboriginal involvement in fire management/research, the Community Huts Partnership, and Wildcare) but still had a way to go in others. Some communities remained disaffected about certain issues which raised questions of how far the Service was willing to pursue matters seen as detrimental either to WHA values or other reserve users. Community interest mapping and interpretation of past practices in the Central Plateau Conservation Area segment of the WHA were items awaiting attention; a start had been made on the former but had since lapsed (O'Loughlin, T., pers. comm., Nov. 2002).

These initiatives point to fresh possibilities for management, perhaps heralding a new era of non-Indigenous community involvement in natural areas like the WHA (as well as Indigenous participation, with a much longer history outside Tasmania). Tasmania's Parks and Wildlife Service will need encouragement to pursue this new agenda, and perhaps heritage professionals are the ones to give it. The big questions are whether resources will

be generated to further develop and undertake projects to understand community cultural values, how the heritage practitioners and the managers will respect the identified values, and how the managers will regard the role of communities in implementation and integrate people and their values into natural area policies and strategies.

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