



Heritage & Community Conference - 27-28 February 2001

Debate 1 - What makes consultation real?

Chair: Dr. Gay Sculthorpe



Dr Gaye Sculthorpe, Melbourne, Victoria (Director of the Indigenous Cultures Program, Museum Victoria; Commissioner, Australian Heritage Commission; former council member Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies) is from the Tasmanian indigenous community and has a PhD in Aboriginal Studies. She has worked extensively with Indigenous cultural heritage in museums at local, State and national levels, and has a particular interest in promoting community involvement in heritage management issues.

Guest Speakers

Ms Helen Martin, East Gippsland, Victoria (Director of East Gippsland Shire) has training in geography and rural and regional planning, and extensive work experience in rural and regional Australia. Key involvements include the City of Melbourne Strategy Plan and the preparation of the East Gippsland Planning and Development strategic plan. Her role includes working on numerous community heritage projects in East Gippsland.

Mr Tom Perrigo, Perth, Western Australia (Director, National Trust of Australia (WA)), has worked on integrated approaches to heritage (such as including indigenous views into the interpretation and management of rural Trust heritage properties), migrant heritage places (such as the Luisini's Winery Heritage Project), and convenient arrangements for the protection of heritage values, including natural values, on private land.

Dr Linda Young, Canberra, ACT, (Senior Lecturer, University of Canberra; member Australia ICOMOS) is a historian by discipline. She was a curator and site manager by trade in WA and SA before she became a teacher of heritage management in Canberra. Dr Young consults mainly as a heritage interpreter, and has been an active community member on local heritage issues.

Discussion: What makes consultation real?

Posts: 9

Registered: Feb 2001

posted 27 February 2001 12:04 PM

Here is a background statement from me:

Community Consultation

The first and perhaps the most important question one needs to ask in this discussion is why community consultation is needed.

If it is simply for 'company policy' or 'political correctness' then I would argue strongly that this is not community consultation.

If one really wants to engage the community in solving a problem then consultation should proceed, however accompanying processes need to be in place to manage the consultation! I believe there are two separate issues which should be addressed.

An example is reflected in the way the Trust operates in Western Australia. In the mid 1990's a cultural shift took place in that the National Trust radically shifted its operations from management by volunteers to management with volunteers. This shift reinforced the voluntary nature of the organization (and the use of members and volunteers) by clearly delineating the values of responsibility and accountability between the community and the administration. Note: one can delegate responsibilities but one can not delegate accountability. A similar process has been put in place for Trust projects all of which involve extensive community consultation with members, volunteers and key others.

So the question comes back – why consult? I believe research has clearly stated that a better solution to a complex problem will be found by involving more people. Simply put, it's more effective. However, the implementation of the solution still comes back to issues of responsibility and accountability. Sometimes the decision to go against the outcomes of community consultation is made for other reasons. As long as those reasons are transparent and defensible to the accountable body then that decision is correct.

Gaye Sculthorpe

Moderator

Posts: 7

Registered: Feb 2001

posted 27 February 2001 12:05 PM

Dear afternoon all

Welcome to this online heritage conference. Also, greetings from sunny Melbourne.

Its certainly a new concept for me to be participating in this way with colleagues across the country. It's great to have this opportunity to explore new ways of communication. I look forward to the contributions that will come in during the conference.

I'd also like to thank our panelists – Helen, Tom and Linda - for agreeing to participate. They bring a wealth of heritage expertise to our discussion.

I'm particularly passionate about our topic today – What makes consultation real? I think that consultation is one of those words that is often used and means many different things to many people. For me, my key word of the moment, is not consultation, but partnership. How can organisations truly work in partnership with various communities?

I'm sure our panelists have much to say about this. Who would like to begin the discussion?

Tom Perrigo

Member

Posts: 9

Registered: Feb 2001

posted 27 February 2001 12:08 PM

It comes back to the basic question of 'Why consult'? I believe most people do because they feel they have to.

Helen Martin

Member

Posts: 6

Registered: Feb 2001

posted 27 February 2001 12:08 PM

These are my introductory notes:

Consultation can operate on a number of levels (the famous 'ladder of community participation' has about 10) but a simple breakdown is: information sharing; consultation; participation.

The main things that make consultation real are:

- Ensuring that you are really listening, giving feedback that indicates that you understand the person's or groups' view(s) of the world (without necessarily endorsing them)
- Making sure they are clear what kind of consultation it is, i.e. is it meeting that that listens to local ideas and needs, but makes decisions on them in the light of policies and priorities for a wider area? (This is a legitimate purpose of consultation, provided it is not presented as something else.) Or is it an attempt to develop a shared vision for an area, to set an agenda that will be worked towards collectively?
- Being clear about the process: who will make decisions, when, how will people be informed and will they get a chance for further input/ comment/ objection?
- Good feedback – depending on the circumstances, this could be a summary of discussions that is sent to everyone who attended or posted on local noticeboards; it could be drafts of strategies or policy papers posted to people who register interest; it could be posted on your web site; or all of the above.
- Keeping your promises – if certain issues have been raised that need to be followed up, make sure they are recorded, with the person responsible identified and that the matter is not only investigated, but the person who raised it is informed of the answer
- Providing a way for the consultation to help communities get what they want, rather than using them to get what you want or to just go through the motions.

Tom Perrigo

Member

Posts: 9

Registered: Feb 2001

posted 27 February 2001 12:11 PM

There are various processes that work and we could discuss these models but the issue is 'consultation - good or bad'. Why consult needs to be addressed before how to consult.

Gaye Sculthorpe

Moderator

Posts: 7

Registered: Feb 2001

posted 27 February 2001 12:12 PM

For the information of participants, one of our panelists - Linda - is having a technical problem joining us at present.

Thanks Tom for your background thoughts about why consult?, and raising issues of responsibility and accountability.

Tom Perrigo

Member

Posts: 9

Registered: Feb 2001

posted 27 February 2001 12:13 PM

It's easier to make a political decision with community support but we now know that the 'squeaking door' syndrome sometimes creates a problem.

Helen Martin

Member

Posts: 6

Registered: Feb 2001

posted 27 February 2001 12:16 PM

Gaye's comments about partnerships are very valid - they emphasise the need for ongoing relationships, trust, reciprocity, and delivery of outcomes.

It is possible and highly effective to actually involve the community - or individuals and interest groups - in carrying out projects. Our recent Community Heritage Plan is an example.

Involvement has all sorts of advantages: local knowledge of places, information sources and shared values; ability to approach people who might otherwise be reluctant to allow their property to be recorded for heritage purposes; ability to 'sell' heritage conservation to the local community and to provide 'champions' to advocate for it at the local political

level; a commitment to help with implementation in a wide range of ways. (There area also some inherent risks, both to the participants and to the 'bureaucrats'.)

However, you cannot involve communities in this way without providing support, and because all communities are different, the level and type of support needs to be tailored to the circumstances.

Gaye Sculthorpe

Moderator

Posts: 7

Registered: Feb 2001

[posted 27 February 2001 12:20 PM](#)

In terms of 'Why consult?', Tom has suggested that better solutions come from involving more people. I hope some of the participants today can give us examples where this has occurred in their areas. What has worked well and what has not worked so well and as Helen has noted, what forms of support are needed for participation.

Tom Perrigo

Member

Posts: 9

Registered: Feb 2001

[posted 27 February 2001 12:22 PM](#)

All this talk about consultation is great but who pays? Do we build it into contracts etc.. In this age of effectiveness and efficiency can we really afford all this feel good stuff - some of my board would not support such action unless it was paid for from outside sources.

Gaye Sculthorpe

Moderator

Posts: 7

Registered: Feb 2001

[posted 27 February 2001 12:25 PM](#)

While we are waiting to get Linda on line, we might throw the debate open to input from all participants. Let us know your views.

Please do this by going into Forum 5 through entering Online Forums at the top of your page. Ask any questions.

Linda Young

New Member

Posts: 2

Registered: Feb 2001

[posted 27 February 2001 12:27 PM](#)

Hi all, I made it. I've had a squizz at your postings so far; did you get my preliminary 'statement'?

Gaye Sculthorpe

Moderator

Posts: 7

Registered: Feb 2001

posted 27 February 2001 12:31 PM

Hi Linda

Welcome. No, we haven't got your preliminary statement online yet. Can you post for us please?

Helen Martin

Member

Posts: 6

Registered: Feb 2001

posted 27 February 2001 12:31 PM

Once you have decided why to consult, who to consult and how to consult, there are still some practicalities and logistics to be considered (particularly for workshops, group consultations or public meetings). The following may read like commonsense, but I think they are important:

- Don't set up an 'us and them' situation. Try to avoid talking from behind a 'head table'. I like to make everyone sit in a circle, so there is no obvious distinction between the convenors/speakers and the other participants. Also, no-one can sit in the back row and niggle with impunity
- Explain who everyone is before you start. If possible (dependent on numbers) get the attendees to introduce themselves as well
- Don't blind people with technology – electronic projectors are wonderful and very useful but avoid too slick a show and don't confuse presentation with communication
- Don't use jargon or academic waffle, but don't talk down to people – never underestimate the ability of the community to contribute good ideas, insights and really valuable information
- NEVER show a map that doesn't include the town or locality in which you are holding your meeting (however good the excuse)!

Tom Perrigo

Member

Posts: 9

Registered: Feb 2001

posted 27 February 2001 12:39 PM

Let's avoid talking about PROCESSES as we could all talk ad nauseum about what works and what doesn't. Can we get back to the fundamentals of why consult and who pays?

Linda Young

New Member

Posts: 2

Registered: Feb 2001

posted 27 February 2001 12:41 PM

Alas, cannot copy my original statement, which I sent to Marilyn in the weekend from home. It was along the lines that 'consultation' is a different kettle of fish depending on which side you're on, i.e. consulter or consultee. It's a very salutary experience for a heritage bod to be on the receiving end of something she does to others!

I've always felt as a consulter that I am sincere, committed to drawing forth my consultees' real issues, and determined to do the best by them. But I realise that when I've been a consultee, I always (well, both times) felt that it was shallow and had other agendas in view.

As a practitioner, thinking aloud now, this is because the professional actually DOES have another agenda in mind: the way to combine all the other inputs to one's conservation plan, interpretation plan or whatever: significance, site constraints, management resources. The interests of on-the-ground stakeholders - consultees - are just one of a number of aspects the professional Linda considers. But the consulted Linda gets plain pissed off and wonders why she was asked in the first place, if her concerns are merely marginal.

Neither the consulter Linda nor the consultee Linda has a clear idea of the answer to this conundrum!

Nicholas Hall

Administrator

Posts: 25

Registered: Feb 2001

posted 27 February 2001 12:43 PM

Here is a few ! thoughts from Linda - just posting them for her.

I know *consultation* from both sides of the fence: I have been *consulted* and I have conducted consultations for heritage purposes. As I write this I realise that the presence and absence of quotation marks for each side of the fence are meaningful. When I have held consultations, eg for the Launceston Railway Workshop interpretation plan project, I felt perfectly sincere and determined to establish the issues and priorities in the minds of the people who'd come to a specially-called meeting, or whom I interviewed in the shopping centre. But when I think about the *consultations* held by a certain local authority regarding a building managed by the historical society of which I was a member, I remember it only as shallow and pre-determined. Hmmm....

This discrepancy suggests that the power relations in many consultations are skewed * in my experience, in favour of the expert, the professional. There is logic here, of course. Consultations (I'm deliberately leaving out the suggestive quotes) about heritage things

and places are usually intended to help an expert get the job right by adding the individual/community perspective. it's one more issue or constraint in planning a management regime (or whatever is it stake). Integrity of the site, condition, provenance, history, stakeholder attitudes * they're all elements to be stirred into the pot to get the best-tasting, most effective product.

Wearing my *consulted* hat again, do I disagree with this process? Yes, somewhat. Why are they asking me, if they're not going to make a significant effort to incorporate my views? But under the consultant hat: No, I don't disagree; it's perfectly reasonable to consider many aspects, not necessarily over-valuing one or another. Professional judgement is the art of drawing out significance to establish sound management principles; I'm not a social worker or community advocate. The person in the other hat immediately asks: why not? Why isn't <my> heritage more important t understand than the council's convenience?

Clearly, both sides often have different purposes in consulting. The individual is likely to feel she has the best interests of the site at heart (thanks to my intimate, specialised knowledge of the place due to my role as inhabitant/user/steward). The professional is likely to feel that many interests must compromise to gain a good heritage management outcome for the place (for I know that the new owner must be satisfied, and so must the stakeholders, and that such mutual satisfaction can be mighty hard to engineer).

Is the heritage professional primarily a community facilitator, or a practical expert in heritage significance?

Gaye Sculthorpe

Moderator

Posts: 7

Registered: Feb 2001

posted 27 February 2001 12:52 PM

As our hour of debate is almost up, would any of the panelists like to make any concluding remarks?

Thanks to all who have participated. I would encourage you all to participate further by entering Forum 5. We look forward to hearing from you.

Helen Martin

Member

Posts: 6

Registered: Feb 2001

posted 27 February 2001 12:59 PM

To obey Tom's instructions and get back to 'why consult': the answers can range from the mundane to the sincere to the downright manipulative, depending on your position in the process (Linda's 'consulter' or 'consultee') and even within the hierarchy of the sponsoring organisation.

I suppose the simple answer is: to improve the decision making process and increase the chances of successful implementation of a project or program AND the implementation of a successful project or program (which is not the same thing).

Improvements through consultation can be seen in purely positive (or Pollyanna) terms: making sure you have all the relevant information; understanding how different options

will impact on different groups in society; ensuring that communities are fully informed about what choices are being made and on what basis; looking for solutions that maximise local community welfare but do not detract from the wider common good.

Exactly the same consultation could also be seen in political terms as: identifying a stinker (policy/project) early enough to ditch it without any of the dirt sticking; finding out what information/views need to be counteracted or discredited; identifying potential obstacles – individuals or groups – that have to be brought on board or neutralised; giving just enough concessions to get the project up and running.

Tom Perrigo

Member

Posts: 9

Registered: Feb 2001

[posted 27 February 2001 01:05 PM](#)

So do we need to be upfront with all key stakeholders about the reason behind the consultation and design a process which reinforces those reasons? But fundamentally to be honest enough to tell people why we're consulting?