

Greater Blue Mountains (Australia)

No 917

Identification

<i>Nomination</i>	The Greater Blue Mountains Area
<i>Location</i>	State of New South Wales
<i>State Party</i>	Australia
<i>Date</i>	30 June 1998

Note This property is nominated under both natural and cultural criteria as a mixed site. In this evaluation only that information from the dossier relating to nomination under the cultural criteria are taken into account.

Justification by State Party

The Greater Blue Mountains nominated area represents an extraordinary story of natural antiquity, diversity, beauty, and human attachment.

Within a continent settled over millennia by indigenous peoples, this protected area is rich in evidence of the cultural continuity of its Aboriginal occupants and their artistic and spiritual expression. The landscape is scattered with dreaming sites and rock art. For 18th and 19th century British colonists, the Blue Mountains were simultaneously a challenging barrier to the inland and a spectacular wild country. Explorers crossed the mountains with difficulty and convict labour followed, constructing a road to western pastoral lands. This ridge-line route, and subsequent railway line, formed the spine for a series of townships, with economic reliance on mining, health promotion, and recreation for Sydney dwellers, associated with access to the surrounding wild scenery.

The rugged upland country of the Greater Blue Mountains is not only of exceptional natural diversity, and of spectacular and ephemeral beauty, but is also closely tied to the lives of people who have occupied, visited, thought about, and cared for it over thousands of years. The property represents, in fact, *the combined works of man and nature*.

The *direct and tangible* association with the million hectares of wild country is expressed in two physical forms. First are the widespread Aboriginal occupation sites, rock-shelter paintings, and rock-platform engravings. Second is the narrower network of historic walking tracks, staircases, and lookouts, festooned from the edges of the ridge crossing the

Mountains and down to the valley floors. Both rock art and tracks are intact and authentic.

The exceptional circumstances of the Greater Blue Mountains are the scale, intensity, and longevity of the cultural association. It is a place where ancient custodianship over the million hectares of dissected plateaux has been replaced by another, more recent, form of custodianship, significant nonetheless.

The intense inter-relationship of nature and people over tens of thousands of years make the Greater Blue Mountains a classic example of the nature-culture continuum, which has exercised the minds of the World Heritage Committee over recent years and was given expression in its Global Strategy meeting of March 1998.

Cultural criterion vi

Category of property

In terms of the categories of cultural property set out in Article 1 of the 1972 World Heritage Convention, this is a *site*.

History and Description

History

Aboriginal people have occupied this region for at least 14,000, and possibly 22,000, years, leaving traces of their presence in occupation sites and rock paintings and engravings. They have exploited and at the same time cared for its natural resources, from which they have also drawn spiritual sustenance.

Bands from the three language groups (Gundungarra, Daruk, and Darkinjung) were attached to defined territories within the region. Their frequent social and ceremonial gatherings are recorded in the rock art. Accounts by colonists of early encounters with these people emphasize their powerful physique, adapted to the rugged terrain in which they lived.

British colonization began on the coast near what is now Sydney in 1788 and numerous attempts were made to cross this formidable natural barrier. In 1814 a route was set up along the Aboriginal pathway on the ridge between the Grose and Cox's rivers, through the centre of the area now being nominated. European settlers quickly began to move across it and appropriated for grazing their stock fertile areas that had been kept clear by the Aboriginal people to encourage wallabies and kangaroos. This disrupted a key element of Aboriginal food supply and led to tensions between the two communities.

These tensions led to a state of war in the eastern part of the Blue Mountains, and a punitive expedition sent from Sydney in 1816 resulted in the massacre of a number of Aborigines. As a consequence they adopted new strategies for survival utilizing resources from the settlers' economy while maintaining their own economy as far as possible.

European settlement grew steadily, especially after the 1861 Crown Lands Alienation Act. Small holdings became widespread in the valley lands and the settlers established good relationships with the Aboriginal communities. Certain lands were excluded from the provisions of the Act and those that followed for public recreation, catchment protection, or forest reserves.

In the 1850s a railway line was built, on the same ridge route as the road, and this attracted a new form of settlement: the country estates of professional men who did not need to make a living from the land. Tourism became common and townships encouraged the building of guesthouses for visitors who made use of the many walking tracks that were developed. The region has been the most significant centre for tourists from the Sydney region ever since that time.

Mining also began in the Blue Mountains. Many small mines were set up in the 1860s to exploit coal, shale, and other minerals, but the deposits were not extensive and the rough settlements that grew up round the mines were quickly abandoned.

Farming and urban development continued throughout the early 20th century, but at the same time efforts were made to preserve the natural environment of the Mountains. In the early 1950s the smaller reserves created by local authorities were amalgamated to form the Blue Mountains National Park. Since that time more National Parks and protected areas have been created in the region.

Recently the Gundungarra and Daruk people have set up local Tribal Councils to reunite the Aboriginal people of the region.

Description

[The ICOMOS evaluation does not include a general description of the entire region proposed for inscription, since this is covered by the IUCN evaluation. The section that follows concentrates on the rock art of the Great Blue Mountains.]

Nearly 700 Aboriginal sites have been recorded in the Greater Blue Mountains area, and 40% of these have an art component

The rock art of the region occurred in two distinct social contexts. Through stylistic behaviour the people of the region, who were not in continuous verbal contact with one another, were able to communicate important social messages and demonstrate both broad group cohesion and intra-group distinctiveness. It has been studied since the beginning of the present century and it was the subject of the first quantitative archaeological analysis of any corpus of Aboriginal art in Australia in 1965.

The rock art occurs in rock shelters and on open sandstone platforms; paintings and engravings are found together on the shelters, but the platforms have only engravings.

The Blue Mountains rock art is dominated by tracks or figurative motifs. They generally consist of simple outlines, with varying degrees of infilling, especially on the painted art. The subjects include anthropomorphic figures, terrestrial and marine animals, birds, items of material culture, and tracks of humans, birds, and kangaroos. Many of them are life-sized, and a few are either very large (up to 7m) or very small (15cm kangaroos).

Stencilling is a common feature in the rock shelters. The outlines are mostly of hands, but cultural artefacts such as hafted axes or boomerangs are also found.

Analysis of the pigmented shelter art by indirect (associated excavated sites) or direct (accelerator mass spectrometry) dating techniques suggests that most of the material is from the last 4000 years, with the most intensive production

between 3000 and 1000 years ago. It was still being produced at the time of European contact after 1788. No technique is available for dating the rock platform engravings, but on stylistic grounds they are considered to be contemporary with the paintings.

The engravings sites are to be found on relatively horizontal stone platforms. More than half of them are on ridgelines; they are rare in valley bottoms. The average number of engravings is ten, but there are four sites with over a hundred, at Burragurra and Frying Pan Rock.

By contrast, the rock shelters are more profusely decorated: the average number of motifs is 25, whilst the largest (Swinton's) has more than 850 and eight contain over 200. The shelters are mostly on hill slopes, the remainder being equally divided between ridges and valley bottoms. Most of the designs are either drawn or painted directly on the surface of the back wall, and less commonly on the ceilings or inside lips of the overhang. The paintings are predominantly monochrome; black predominates, followed by white, red, and yellow. The choice of colour varies significantly between different areas.

Many of the decorated shelters have produced evidence of human occupation. It is likely that most of the sites were occupied, but the evidence is below the surface and can only be revealed by excavation.

Management and Protection

[This aspect of the nominated property will be covered in detail in the IUCN evaluation.]

All the land within the nominated area is public land, vested in the State of New South Wales (NSW). With the exception of the Jenolan Caves Reserve, which is a karst conservation reserve, the entire area is protected as national parks established under the NSW National Parks and Wildlife Act 1974. They are under the control and management of the Director-General of the NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service.

Management plans are in force or in preparation for all the parks, consistent with the NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service's *Field Management Policies*. Among their objectives are the preservation of Aboriginal sites and historic features, for which detailed guidelines are laid down in the *Field Management Policies*. There is a policy laid down for consulting Aboriginal communities on all matters that relate to their heritage and way of life.

Conservation and Authenticity

Conservation history

Conservation began with the establishment of the first reserve in 1867, and more were added in the following decades; they were consolidated in 1917 and incorporated into the Blue Mountains National Park in 1987. However, the impetus in creating these reserves was directed towards the maintenance of their natural and scenic qualities. Concern for the Aboriginal rock art is a more recent phenomenon, resulting from post-World War II archaeological studies and a revaluation of the status of the Aboriginal people in contemporary Australian society.

Intensive survey, inventory, and selective excavation of Aboriginal sites has been proceeding steadily in recent decades. However, the potential exists for discovering many more sites, but work is hampered by the difficulty of access to many high mountain areas. Conservation and protection interventions have been made on some of the more accessible and spectacular sites.

Authenticity

The authenticity of Australian Aboriginal rock art has been the subject of considerable discussion among professionals. Repainting under the control of elders with traditional knowledge is essential to cultural practice, and to treat these as untouchable prehistoric art, comparable with that of Europe, is inappropriate, since the Aboriginal culture survives to the present day. Repainting and re-grooving of engravings also have a positive social value as a means of cultural revival for the Aboriginals.

It may be argued that the rock art of the Greater Blue Mountains area is authentic in terms of design, function, and setting. However, paradoxically, the absence of a consistent policy of repainting by the Aboriginal people might at the same time be considered to produce a lower level of material authenticity.

Evaluation

Action by ICOMOS

An ICOMOS expert mission visited the Greater Blue Mountains area in February 1999. Part of that mission was joint with the IUCN expert mission.

Qualities

The Greater Blue Mountains area is one of great natural beauty where humans have lived for many millennia. The Aboriginal people have left striking evidence of their beliefs and way of life in the form of rock art of high quality.

Comparative analysis

Rock art is the most durable and impressive evidence that has survived of early human societies. Only in Australia, however, has that art continued up to the present day. In judging rock-art sites, therefore, comparisons can only logically be made with similar sites in that continent.

Two Aboriginal sites containing painted rock art are already on the World Heritage List – Uluru-Kata Tjuta and Kakadu. These, however, are inscribed as cultural landscapes rather than on the basis of their rock art alone. Because of its proximity to Sydney, the Blue Mountains area has attracted settlers and visitors in large numbers since the beginning of the 19th century. In the Greater Blue Mountains area (especially Yengo National Park) there remains a significant assemblage of engraved rock art and some painted art. Nevertheless, many traces of the impact of Aboriginal groups over many millennia have been almost completely obliterated. A partial network of tracks is still extant, but most of these date from the European settlement rather than the earlier period. The most enduring remains of the early Aboriginal occupants of the area are their rock art.

In a comparative study carried out in 1998, the ICOMOS International Scientific Committee on Rock Art identified six criteria for evaluating rock-art sites: aesthetic qualities;

ethnological qualities; archaeological and chronological qualities; environmental qualities; number of images in a prescribed area (sacred sites); and degree of protection. In applying these criteria, the study identified only two collections of Aboriginal painted rock art that it considered to merit special consideration for the World Heritage List – the Laura area of Cape York (Queensland) and the Bradshaw site at Kimberley (Western Australia). It does not include any engraved art sites.

ICOMOS comments

ICOMOS is concerned about the priority given to conservation planning for rock-art sites in the management plans seen by its expert mission. Their vulnerability would, in the opinion, justify the development of an overall strategy and the assignment of high priority to conservation planning and active management of selected sites. The former should include the adoption of guidelines for repainting and re-grooving in consultation with Aboriginal elders.

Some of the more easily accessible sites are in need of greater protection and conservation. The engraving sites at Burragurra and Finchley are at risk from bulldozers during fire management and from four-wheel-drive traffic. Some vandalism combined with weathering make the Smith's Pass painting site in special need of urgent conservation.

The State Party cites only criterion vi for inscription as a cultural property, justifying it in terms of "the intense inter-relationship of nature and people over tens of thousands of years." Whilst this is incontestable, there is a serious discontinuity in that inter-relationship. The long-lived Aboriginal culture achieved a perfect symbiotic relationship with the entire landscape from the mountains to the valley bottoms, on which its physical impact was minimal. The European relationship, by contrast, virtually destroyed the Aboriginal system. It imposed a new and intrusive system on the more fertile and accessible sections, while leaving vast areas of inaccessible land untouched. These areas are now regarded as needed for conserving the natural beauty for aesthetic and recreational reasons. The role of the Blue Mountains as a source of recreation, art, and nature conservation is acknowledged, but this cannot be interpreted as being of outstanding universal value.

ICOMOS finds it difficult to accept this as a justification for use of cultural criterion vi. It has also considered the application of cultural criteria ii and iii, but it feels that the case to be made out under these criteria is weak, especially for the natural area that has been nominated.

ICOMOS wishes to draw the attention of the State Party to the need to reconcile the fire-management practices on open sandstone surfaces with policies for the long-term protection of the cultural values of such sites.

Recommendation

That this property should not be inscribed on the World Heritage List on the basis of cultural criteria.

ICOMOS, September 1999