



Indigenous belonging – our heritage

By Professor John Lester

As the formal saying of 'sorry' to the Aboriginal people and the significance of that gesture are marked in the history of Australia, signalling its maturity as a nation, it is timely for us to share with each other our collective knowledges and beliefs.

Indigenous people, like the National Trust, are entrusted with the proper care, maintenance and nurturing of that which both groups hold dearly and wish to protect. Symbolically the path has now been laid where Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians can legitimately begin the process of healing and, most importantly, share our futures on equal terms. Part of this sharing is in telling the many wonderful stories of very positive interactions between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples in this country. This short article will be a contribution to this ongoing relationship between the National Trust and the world's oldest continuous living trustees.

At one with the land, and responsible for it

Indigenous peoples have from time immemorial been responsible for the protection and nurturing of that which was laid down in the Dreaming. This was the time when land, water and living things were created – a time when the laws of the land were laid down – the time of the cosmos. Indigenous peoples became at one with nature and were responsible for protecting and respecting life and place. Such equality with natural things provided the foundations of Indigenous existence and how lives were lived. Laws were established which clearly articulated roles and responsibilities for maintaining balance along the lines of age, gender and ritual responsibility. Place became the intricate web which tied trustee responsibility and significance to particular groups of Indigenous peoples with different cultures and languages; our country dictated our genesis. Person and place

became one, entrenched in mutual respect and responsibility, each to the other. The sacred/secret (restricted spiritual) and secular (daily life) worlds of Indigenous nations were spelt out at this time. To understand the trusteeship of Indigenous society one must understand these foundations.

Connections with the Dreaming were continually reaffirmed through ritual and place and were maintained through intergenerational practice. Stories, songlines, ceremony and Indigenous literacy practice through what today is known as art forms, stencils, bark paintings, body painting, dance, sand drawings, rock engravings and carvings reinforced our belonging to place. Our cathedrals are not man-made but are creations under our Dreaming and take the form of mountains, rivers and rocks carved from our natural environments. They are embedded in our being and existence. They permeate our very existence.

Our heritage – as old as time itself

For the over 500 Indigenous nations throughout Australia, the link to their place and their Dreaming has fostered a great richness and diversity in culture and language. Fundamentally the integral linking of nature and Indigenous peoples as equals creates a value system which is very different from that of many non-Indigenous peoples. While holding strong ties through custodial responsibility for place, Indigenous peoples do not own place but are actually one with nature. Our sacred/secret and significant sites which belong to us collectively are products of our Dreaming, they are not man-made.



Opposite page from left: Paintings such as the hand stencils at Yengo National Park, the Bulgabdry Man and Biaimi helped to pass connections with the Dreamtime down through generations.

This page from left: Natural mountains, rivers and rocks hold sacred sites, such as this rock formation at Tiddalick. Photos: John Oates

Stone tool quarry, Somersby.

This at times has been hard to comprehend by non-Indigenous people coming from many of the dominant Australian cultures, with their more material-based western paradigms.

The cultural, physical and spiritual entanglement is a complex relationship which is generally only shared amongst other Indigenous peoples of the world. Heritage to Indigenous peoples is intrinsic with this embodiment of self and place. What non-Indigenous peoples would call nature, geography, history and religion are the very essence of being for Indigenous peoples. With their clear understanding of this interrelationship and interdependence, the responsibility for caring for place becomes paramount. At one with nature, our heritage surrounds us. Our sites are real and not constructed and therefore require a different kind of trusteeship.

The daily lives of Indigenous people revolved around their ancestral place. The link with land permeated every aspect of our existence, whether in sacred/secret restricted domains or in the secular domain. What and how we ate, hunted, gathered or interacted with one another was laid down in traditional law, handed down with all its intricacies over hundreds of generations. Traditional law was designed to continue the harmonious relationship with mother earth and Indigenous cosmos.

When Indigenous peoples talk of heritage and custodianship we refer to practices which are as old as time itself. Our sacred and significant sites have been cared for by generations of our ancestors. These sites are our sense of being.

Indigenous history is vast but continuing. While respect and custodianship of traditional lands are of paramount importance, our more recent past and contemporary lives also hold significant cultural heritage. Canoe and shield trees, artefact remnants of the past, must be equally protected along with new places of significance in the built environment, where our emergent political struggles came into being. Our Indigenous contemporary heritage is part of Australia's heritage.

National Trust role – extended through time immemorial

The 'sorry business', now that it has happened, means that the National Trust's role in the conservation of Australia's heritage can be genuinely extended through time immemorial. This article is timely, for now we are on an equal footing. Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples can legitimately share the oldest continuing living culture in the world. The Trust in partnership with Indigenous peoples can as it has done in the past, shoulder the responsibility to care and assist Indigenous people in their custodial roles.

This emerging relationship will take time and will require specific strategic approaches to help cement relationships. I as the first Indigenous member of the Trust Board a few years back accepted the first of what I hoped would be many and ongoing invitations to Indigenous peoples to work intimately with the Trust. There needs to be much consideration and understanding built up between the Trust and Indigenous peoples if we are to harness the collective strengths of both in the battle to ensure our past is not forgotten and our future is clearly reflected in our rich histories. I see many yarn times ahead – or workshops as they are now called – between Indigenous custodians and the Trust.

Our now shared histories of stone tool sites, scared trees, rock paintings and engravings and historic buildings can only enrich the fine work of the Trust in partnership with Indigenous custodians. One simple word, 'sorry' has opened up the opportunity to share resources and dialogue on caring for this country and its rich cultural past so all Australians can stand tall.

Suggested follow up reading: Kleinert, S. and Neale, M. (Editors), The Oxford Companion to Aboriginal Art and Culture. Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 2000.

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