

SUBMISSION NO. 48

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The Committee Secretary
Standing Committee on Environment and Heritage
House of Representatives
PO Box 6021
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600
AUSTRALIA

Dear Sir

SUBMISSION ON PROPOSED AUSTRALIAN SUSTAINABILITY CHARTER

Australia ICOMOS cautiously welcomes the preparation of an Australian Sustainability Charter. We have not prepared a lengthy submission at this stage. We have however provided some preliminary comment about the scope of the proposed Charter, and are willing to offer further advice and assistance if needed during later stages of your inquiry process.

Australia ICOMOS, Australia's leading non-government professional organisation for cultural heritage, is the national committee of the International Council on Monuments and Sites. This is a non-government professional/expert organisation primarily concerned with the philosophy, terminology, methodology and techniques of cultural heritage conservation. Internationally, ICOMOS works closely with UNESCO, and acts as UNESCO's principal adviser on cultural aspects of the operation of the World Heritage Convention. As members of an international NGO, we are part of a global professional network.

Australia ICOMOS has a key role in contributing to heritage conservation philosophy, methods and standards of practice in Australia. Our members are professionally qualified and experienced practitioners from a wide range of disciplines, working in all facets of the understanding and protection of Australia's cultural heritage places, at all levels of government and in the private sector. We regularly provide feedback and advice on heritage policy and philosophy to the Australian Government.

In our recent submission to the Productivity Commission Inquiry into the Conservation of Australia's Historic Heritage Places, we noted the importance of integrating cultural heritage and its conservation into broader economic, social and environmental policy. The reason for this is the potential impacts on cultural heritage, both positive and negative, that may arise from decisions made in these other sectors. In particular, policy-

making for sustainability, while having close links with the aims of cultural heritage conservation, also has the potential for serious adverse impact on our ability to conserve our heritage.

For example, the discussion paper prepared by the Committee refers to the foundation principles of the Western Australia Sustainability Strategy, which include “the need to develop a strong, growing and diversified economy”. However, until very recently there has been a lack of adequate recognition that the current economic system has contributed substantially to the degradation of the environment, because the true costs of environmental damage, including that to heritage places, have not been adequately reflected in current economic indicators. The potential long-term impacts of this, both economically and socially, are only now being addressed. The discussion of how the real costs and benefits of economic activity are properly measured in a sustainable economy is an important one to progress within the context of a Sustainability Charter.

Australia ICOMOS acknowledges that the benefits of cultural heritage, in common with other aspects of the quality of life, are often difficult to measure. However, this does not mean that they are not important. Economists have now begun to grapple with the issue of quantifying intangibles such as happiness, so that they can be set against more easily measured economic indicators such as GDP. In the case of cultural heritage, although National State of the Environment reporting does cover this area, the recent draft report of the Productivity Commission noted that there needs to be considerable improvement in data collection and the development of performance indicators.

We strongly recommend that a future Australian Sustainability Charter should acknowledge the importance of cultural heritage, and note that the protection of cultural heritage is one of the five fundamental principles of the Swedish environmental objectives cited in the discussion paper. There are many existing policies and charters in the heritage management sector that define best practice and guide the conservation of cultural (both indigenous and non-indigenous) and natural heritage, including our own Burra Charter, the Australia ICOMOS Charter for Places of Cultural Significance. Our understanding of “heritage” is broad ranging, encompassing places (landscapes to individual sites), objects and cultural practices. In our opinion, there is no need for the proposed Australian Sustainability Charter to replicate or indeed replace existing cultural heritage policies and guidelines, but we feel it is important for the Charter to refer to them and integrate them with other aspects of sustainability.

The relationship between cultural heritage and sustainability falls into two broad categories, both of which deserve consideration. These are:

- the contribution that cultural heritage practices can make to broader environmental, social and economic outcomes, and
- the recognition that cultural heritage conservation (of both places and practices) should be a desired sustainability outcome in its own right.

A fundamental principle of cultural heritage conservation practice is to look after the **values** of a place. As such, heritage conservation has demonstrated links with social wellbeing and sustainability. As noted in the 2004 version of the *Illustrated Burra Charter*:

Places of cultural significance enrich people’s lives, often providing a deep and inspirational sense of connection to community and landscape, to the past and to lived experiences. They are historical records that are important as tangible expressions of Australian identity and experience. Places of cultural significance reflect the diversity of

*our communities, telling us about who we are and the past that has formed us and the Australian landscape. They are irreplaceable and precious.*¹

People strongly value the quality of their local historic environment, the distinctive look and feel of the places in which they live and work. Cultural heritage is central to how we see ourselves and to our identity as individuals, communities and as a nation. It is a physical record of what our country is and how it came to be. Cultural heritage is therefore a living part of our modern environment and way of life, not just a static object for preservation. Nor is heritage merely part of an entertainment theme park, or an optional extra in planning our environment.

Retaining the values of a heritage place commonly results also in retaining much of the existing fabric (building materials), so that fewer resources are used to house or sustain the activity or the use of the place. This approach also provides the impetus for continued use of traditional maintenance/repair techniques and practices, which generally use more labour and fewer materials than modern repair techniques. This could apply equally to a building, landscape or other type of heritage place. The retention of fabric, and preference for repair and maintenance over replacement, are examples of how heritage practice as espoused by the Burra Charter can contribute to desired sustainability outcomes. The Burra Charter supports the retention of existing fabric, discourages the use of unnecessary new resources and in essence is about respecting the values of places and associated practices within viable future uses, which ensure their survival. These principles of cultural heritage conservation can thus be seen as special cases of the broader principle of sustainability of resources.

Cultural heritage places may also contribute to our understanding of an aspect of our past or enrich our experience of the environment around us. These, and the many other values that heritage places embody, and the many ways they improve the quality and experience of life, promote the argument that heritage conservation should be an outcome of sustainability in its own right.

There are times when heritage conservation outcomes may come into conflict with other aspects of sustainability principles. This is particularly the case for heritage places that we want to keep, but that may have passed out of use. Many heritage buildings may also not meet current energy efficiency standards. Such issues need to be resolved in a way that recognises the importance of all aspects of environmental sustainability, including cultural heritage.

Finally, the discussion paper observes that the national ESD strategy recognises the interconnectedness of local, state and national actions. We note that heritage management systems already have this interconnectedness, and moreover include the local community as the fourth and most important tier.

Australia ICOMOS would be happy to continue to provide comment and feedback on the Sustainability Charter, and I know that many of our members who have expertise and interest in this area will also be keen to engage with you, and where appropriate to participate more directly in aspects of this work.

¹ Marquis-Kyle, Peter and Walker, Meredith. *The Illustrated Burra Charter*. Australia ICOMOS, Melbourne 2004.

In summary, we would make three key points:

- the Australian Sustainability Charter should acknowledge the importance of cultural heritage and integrate it with other aspects of sustainability;
- the proposed Charter does not need to replicate or replace existing cultural heritage policies and guidelines, but it is important that the Charter should validate and refer to them; and
- cultural heritage issues should not be overridden or compromised by other aspects of environmental sustainability.

Australia ICOMOS would be happy to provide further input or review the draft Charter.

Yours faithfully

Peter Phillips
President, Australia ICOMOS