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Obligations to objects: Tangled histories and changing contexts of The Burnett River Rock Engravings

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ABSTRACT: This paper discusses changing obligations toward objects from an archaeological site held by the Queensland Museum, through a long-term, 40 year case study. Between 1971 and 1972 a selection of 92 stone blocks weighing up to 5 tonnes containing Aboriginal engravings were cut out of the site and distributed to multiple locations across Queensland by the State Government under the provisions of the then Aboriginal Relics Preservation Act 1967. The site was subsequently flooded during dam construction and the removed blocks became part of the Queensland Museum's collection. This paper chronicles the history of the site and its 'salvage', the consequences of fragmentation of the site for community and institutions, the creation of 92 museum objects, the transformation from immobile to mobile cultural heritage, and community-led requests for their repatriation back to country.

KEY WORDS: Burnett River Engravings, repatriation, sacred objects, museum archaeology, cultural heritage, identity, rock art, engravings

Introduction

Over the last few decades, there has been a considerable shift in cultural heritage management (CHM) frameworks away from earlier 'traditional' paternalistic CHM approaches, where marked cultural appropriation, 'preservation at any cost', privileged stewardship and unequal power and authority and issues of ownership and control were the norm. These approaches now sit awkwardly with contemporary efforts focussed on decolonising practices, issues of authenticity in Aboriginal cultural landscapes, the

recognition of tangible and intangible aspects of cultural heritage, and fully collaborative, community-based practice and the long-term relationships required for building trust (e.g. Andrews 2014; Andrews and Buggey 2008; Roth this volume; Smith 2001; Waterson and Smith 2010).

Although a decidedly positive shift, there are many examples where the legacy of the past looms large today. There are few detailed Australian case-studies documenting these shifting frameworks with Indigenous participants providing their perspectives and critiques of this history, and far reaching consequences for Aboriginal community. By interrogating the implementation of the first heritage legislation in the State of Queensland, enabling the salvage of parts of a sacred Aboriginal site, we explore the missed opportunities and long-term damage created by the main focus of heritage management in the 20th century that excluded Aboriginal perspectives and ownership of cultural knowledge and guardianship of country and sites. We discuss the shift from the archaeological primacy of knowledge and custodianship of heritage to one where Aboriginal owners are full participants and leading the work to be completed. Much remains at stake for community members in asserting their rights and responsibilities in management of their cultural heritage.

The Burnett River Engravings

The Burnett River Engravings (BRE) site (state file number KE: A1) is an extensive Aboriginal art site (3348 m²) comprised of a very large assemblage of rock engravings (petroglyphs). The site is located on an isolated outcrop of sandstone on a sandy spit adjacent to the northern bank of the Burnett River, at the confluence of Pine Creek, west of the town of Bundaberg, Queensland (Edmonds 1984: 2; Ulm and Lilley 1995: iii; Figure 1). The engravings are considered the largest Aboriginal rock-engraving site on the eastern coast of Queensland, representing “a unique artistic tradition” (Williams et al nd: 1).

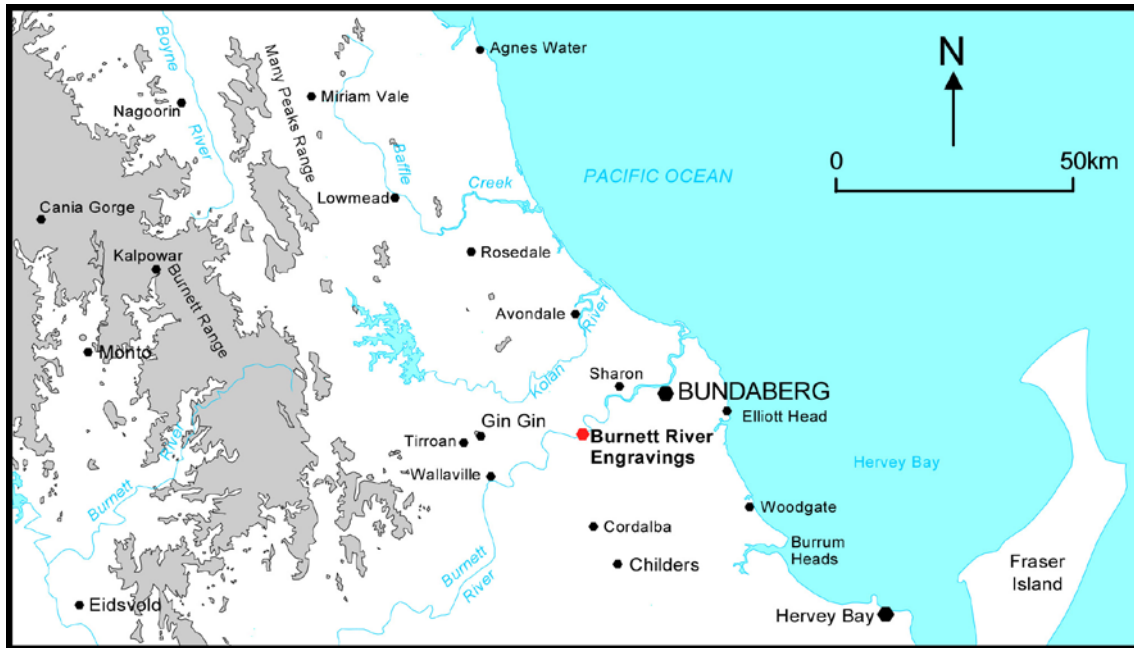


Figure 1: Location of the Burnett River Rock Engravings site.

The site is variously referred to in the literature as the ‘South Kolan art engraving site’ (Rola-Wojciechowski 1983: 1), the ‘South Kolan engraving sites’ (Rola-Wojciechowski 1983: 2), the ‘South Kolan rock engraving site’ (Rola-Wojciechowski 1983: 5), the ‘South Kolan rock engravings’ (Rola-Wojciechowski 1983: 7), the ‘South Kolan engravings’ (Rola-Wojciechowski 1983: 97), the ‘Burnett River Engravings’ (Maynard 1976; Quinnell 1976) and the ‘Bundaberg Engraving site’ (Sutcliffe 1972c cited in Rola-Wojciechowski 1983: 5). The earliest European documentation of the site dates to the 1880s, in published discussions of the rock art by Tyron (1884), Matthews (1897, 1910) and Elkin (1949, 1975). Matthews (1897) indicated that European settlers had known of the site since at least the 1870s but that little information was known to Europeans. Matthews visited the site, recording it and interpreting the engravings via comparison with other Aboriginal art mediums (e.g. baskets, shields, nets and body designs). Elkin proposed the engravings represented human or animal forms, natural phenomena, myths and symbols which were significant to the local Aboriginal people. The removal of the BRE had begun with the removal of an engraving of a foot prior

to 1924 (Woolford 2003). An account of the engravings was made in the 1925 records of the Office of the Chief Protector of Aborigines (Sutcliffe 1974: 10).

Letters and photographs about the site were also sent to the Queensland Museum (Figure 2). A letter from I.H. Burkett to Queensland Museum (QM) Director Dr R Hamlyn-Harris indicates that Burkett made drawings of the carvings ca. 1850, noting there were marks attributed to axe grinding. He observed, “Amongst the most frequent repeated marks was the outline of a foot or hand ... also the shape of a bird’s foot. There were also sinuous marks as if the artist had tried to represent a snake or centipede” (23 October 1912).

Photographs donated to the QM by Alderman Maynard in 1915 show the site embedded in sand, clearly contrasting with the surrounding “miles of impenetrable scrub” noted by early explorers (Walker 1890: 7 in Rola-Wojciechowski 1984: 26). Additional photographs were donated to the QM in 1924 by Sir M Nathan in which the more recognisable motifs were chalked in. A local man remembered the engravings in 1928, being “more plentiful and clearer then” and that people would “camp at the top of the river bank above the engravings” (Anon 1969a).



Figure 2: Early image of the site with women and men standing near the engravings in the bed of the Burnett River. Photograph given to Alderman Maynard during Hamlyn Harris' visit to Bundaberg in October 1915 (QM Photographic Collection EH 313).

In 1969 they were 'rediscovered' by Mr W.B. Frederick and Mr Ian Gibson (Anon 1971b). The BRE had been exposed "when large sections of the Burnett River bed was exposed during droughts in recent years", and some covered with sand and gravel from a recent flood (Anon 1972b). Frederick, "a keen student of Aboriginal lore" made polythene tracings of the exposed engravings, sending these to the Principal of the then Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies (now the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies), Canberra, Frederick McCarthy, for analysis and recording (Frauca 1969: 3). McCarthy believed that removal of the overburden covering the engravings would be worthwhile, suggesting their permanent exhibition. McCarthy directed Frederick to the Director of Queensland's Department of Aboriginal and Island Affairs (DAIA) who was the authority responsible for the archaeological site under the Aboriginal Relics Preservation Act

1967 (QLD). Gibson wrote on Frederick's behalf to the Director of DAIA, Brown forwarded the letter to the Advisory Committee to the Director under the Act. The Committee's advice was that under the Act the BRE belonged to the Crown and any interference with it, including the removal of overburden, could lead to prosecution (Woolford 2003: 50-51).

'Removal for their protection'

Industrial development at the Burnett River was argued to threaten profound and irreversible damage to the archaeological site. In 1969 plans were made to construct an irrigation barrage downstream of the site, to be built at an estimated cost of \$1,660,000 (Anon 1971a). At this time the newly created ARPA 1967 aimed to "provide for the preservation and protection of Anthropological, Ethnological, Archaeological and Prehistoric Aboriginal Relics", which were "fast disappearing" due to theft, defacement or destruction. Aboriginal Cultural Heritage (termed 'relics') were the property of the Crown, the Act made it an offence to deal in or hold recently discovered Aboriginal relics, or to excavate relics without permission (Anon 1969b, see also Smith 2001 for legislative background).

The Aboriginal Relics Advisory Committee was set up in 1968 to advise the Minister charged with the administration of the Act, on all matters relating to the preservation and protection of archaeological material. The committee met monthly to discuss progress and problems of archaeological work in Queensland. The Archaeological Division (part of the Department of Aboriginal and Island Affairs) was set up in the first half of 1971, comprised of an archaeologist and clerical assistant, the office was located in the grounds of the QM, then located at Gregory Terrace, Brisbane. The Archaeological Division dealt with the technical and administrative aspects of 'relics' protection, preservation and archaeological research in Queensland, ensuring that the policies relating to relics protection and preservation could be effectively carried out. Another means of cultural heritage protection

were Aboriginal Mobile Ranger Patrols including inspectors and wardens, in areas in which Aboriginal 'relics' were dense and subject to interference (Sutcliffe 1972a).

The potential submergence of the BRE was brought to the attention of the Aboriginal Relics Advisory Committee in 1969 by two concerned local residents (Woolford 2003). The Advisory Committee functioning under the Act recommended to the Minister for Conservation, Marine and Aboriginal Affairs, in 1969 that "action be taken to remove and preserve a selection of the relics" (Sutcliffe 1974: 1, Anon 1971c) "to provide a complete archaeological record of the engravings" (Sutcliffe 1972b: 4). These engravings would be removed by the state government under the provisions of the Act (Ulm and Lilley 1995: iii). The engravings occurred at a low point in the river bed and would have been covered by water stored in the Burnett River barrage (Sutcliffe nd; Anon 1971a), flooding "one of eastern Australia's most valuable Aboriginal art galleries" (Anon 1969a). In 1970 the committee resolved that the site should be fully recorded and to remove as many engraved petroglyphs as possible (Anon 1970). It is perhaps no coincidence that the removal occurred around the time of the construction of the Aswan Dam, completed in 1971. The salvage of the rock-cut temples at Abu Simbel in the 1960s was celebrated as a triumph of engineering, international co-operation and concern for cultural heritage (Allam 2010).

The immanent construction of the barrage led to their recording and salvage during 1971 and 1972. Following appointment in 1971 the job of recording and salvaging the site was undertaken by the then State Archaeologist, Ms K Sutcliffe, from the Department of Aboriginal and Island Affairs, in two consecutive periods during 1971 and 1972. Sutcliffe, who supervised a salvage operation, wrote a draft Master of Arts thesis on the salvage process, but apparently did not submit the manuscript for examination. No complete copies are known to exist.

A significance assessment was completed. In July 1971, when the water level had dropped sufficiently to enable an adequate survey of the area to be made. Following government procedure at the time, the historic and scientific value of the site was assessed, and it was decided that “the ‘art gallery’ merited preservation” and as such an effort to preserve the engravings was made (Anon 1971b) so that “no loss to the archaeological record and cultural heritage of the State occurred” (Sutcliffe 1974: 1). Specific engravings were removed, along with the underlying portion of sandstone rock, to provide “an archaeological sample giving full representation to the various styles, techniques and motifs present” (Sutcliffe 1972c: 106). Newspapers reiterated “the carvings have to be removed or lost forever beneath the waters of the proposed Bundaberg Irrigation Scheme” (Anon 1971: d). The government department responsible for the administration of the Act undertook a project to remove many examples of the rock art as possible. The acting Aboriginal Affairs Minister said that the “ancient carvings, known as petroglyphs ... were of major archaeological value and would be removed for restoration as museum exhibits” (Anon 1971a). It was proposed removal would preserve the engravings, provide protection and could educate local audiences on the variety and characteristics of Aboriginal culture. “Only clear and distinct carvings would be removed” (Anon 1971d).

A newspaper article captured the decision: “The department said the engravings were believed to have been made by Aboriginal people many years ago and as such, they constituted relics under the terms of the ARPA ... a specialist committee had recommended to the minister that ‘every effort should be made to preserve the engravings’ ...’under the provision of the ARPA all relics in the state were the property of the crown and it was possible for the minister to recommend that relics may be preserved in places other than the QM...the carvings declared of major historic significance” (Anon 1971a). The government removal of the engravings was publicised as one of the most significant and progressive

cultural heritage enterprises ever undertaken in Australia. Indeed it was the “first time that in Australia such an archaeological task has been successfully carried out which involved considerable technological difficulties and heavy machinery” (Anon 1972d).

When first encountered by Sutcliffe a large proportion of the site was embedded in sand and gravel. This was thought to be the result of extensive land clearance in the upper reaches of the Burnett River which, over time, had increased the rate of siltation in the river channel. She suggested that the site was accessible during the dry season but inundated during times of flood. Prior to land clearance the site was surrounded by water and would have been periodically submerged during seasonal floods (Edmonds 1984: 3 citing Sutcliffe 1972a: 6-7). Removal of sand and gravel overburden was required to determine the full extent of engravings and number involved, enable recording and facilitate removal (Sutcliffe 1974: 1). Volunteers were requested in the local newspaper: “any high school student at present on holidays wishing to help could contact the Bundaberg Irrigation and Water Supply Commission (BIWSC) but that “the volunteers should be males, as hard work would be the order of the day” (Anon 1971d).

Approximately 6000 tonnes of sand would be removed, to expose the entire outcrop upon which engravings had been depicted (Sutcliffe 1972a). The work had to be accomplished with maximum care to avoid scratching or defacing the engravings. Sand was probed to determine the extent of underlying rock and depth of sand: a map of the rock and spot depths enabled the careful use of a 2 cubic yard backhoe by the BIWSC and workers from the Monduran Dam project (Anon 1971b) (Figure 3). Final clearing was carried out manually by 25 young men from Cherbourg Aboriginal Mission, assisted by two foremen from the BIWSC, using wheelbarrows, shovels, brooms, trowels and two pumps (Sutcliffe 1974: 2). Sand removal took approximately 10 days to complete (Ulm and Lilley 1995: iii), the boys camping on site for the duration (Anon 1971a, d). The removal of sand revealed that

the site was 93m long, up to 36m wide (Williams et al. nd: 2). The site was extensively jointed, running approximately northeast to southwest as well as north to south (Sutcliffe 1972c: 4 in Edmonds 1984: 2). Many of the engravings that had been covered with sand were found to be in a much better state of preservation than those engravings exposed to normal river flow. The latter had been severely abraded or completely removed. Some indication of the abrasion rate was noted where European graffiti from 1906 had been severely abraded (Edmonds 1984: 7-8). Once clear of sand, the site was aerially photographed (Figure 4).

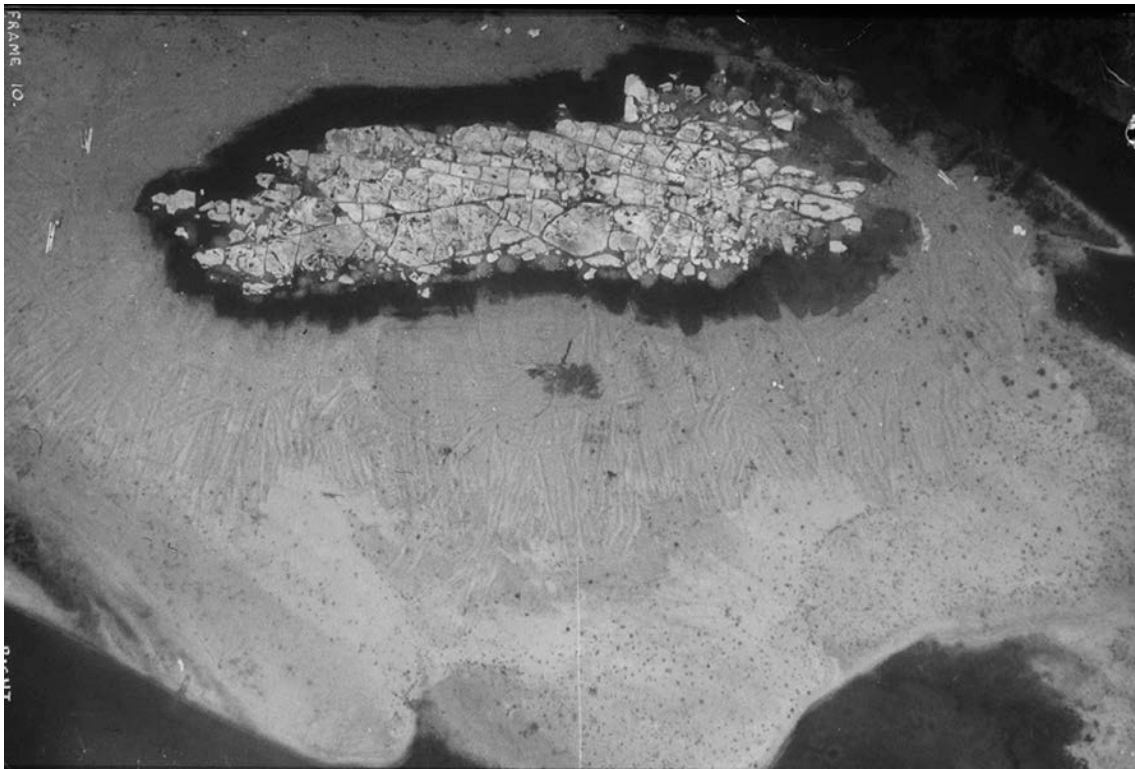


Figure 3: Photograph of the salvage works, 1971-1972. Courtesy Cultural Heritage Unit Image Library, Department of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Partnerships.



Figure 4: Aerial view of the BRE prior to the salvage program, ca 1972. The University of Queensland Archives (UQA5131P43).

After the site was cleared of sand, the four months from August to December 1971 were spent mapping the site, recording the art and photographing. The sandstone outcrop was mapped using a 1 metre grid system laid over the site approximately north/south and east/west. The outcrop was divided into 12 areas and specific engravings were recorded within each 12 meter square (Edmonds 1984: 7-8).

All engravings were traced, in full scale, onto sheets of clear polythene with felt pen by Sutcliffe and an assistant from the BIWSC. As four engraving techniques were present at the site, different notations of these were used: fully pecked (solid infill), prebraded (outline only, dotted infill), abraded (outline only, no infill), drilled (solid infill, isolated circular forms less than 10 cm in size). Broken lines indicate doubt as to the technique utilised, or the location/existence of engraving due to abrasion. In these cases only the discernible edge was

marked in (Edmonds 1984: 7-8). The location of the original polythene tracings was unknown for over 10 years, and was discovered during the Gooreng Gooreng Cultural Heritage Project (GGCHP; see below) in the basement of the Department of Family Services building. They are currently held at the QM. Over 400 groups of engravings were identified in the soft sandstone. They covered an area of about 150 square yards (c.125m²) but they were not continuous throughout the entire area.

A full black and white photographic record was taken of the engravings. Two photographs were taken of each engraving in situ, and photographs were also taken to document removal (Edmonds 1984: 7-8). Recording was completed by December 1972. To date the hundreds of photographs taken in recording of the site have not been located (Ulm et al 1997: 2). There was insufficient time for removal to commence prior to the next wet season. Floods during the 1971 to 1972 wet season recovered the rock with sand and gravel, which was again removed by a team from Cherbourg in August 1972 (Sutcliffe nd). The excavation was filmed on Channel 7's "This Week has Seven Days", televised throughout Australia between the 16 and 17 of December 1972 (Sutcliffe 1972b: 5).

In September 1972, 92 blocks of stone were removed from the larger site in 10 working days by a drilling team from the BIWSC. A foreman, two drillers, a rigger and a rigger's assistant from the Monduran Dam were involved. Crowbars, air front end loaders and plastic explosives were utilised (Ulm and Lilley 1995: iii; Williams et al nd: 2). A test drill on a block with no engravings demonstrated the rock was stable, and did not disintegrate under the drill and jack hammer. Each block was assessed individually due to the variation in the depth of parent rock, fault lines and the orientation (Sutcliffe 1974: 2). Loose slabs were levered up and lifted onto adjacent sand, manoeuvred with a backhoe scoop, while 24 blocks were drilled and lifted onto the sand by backhoe. Sets of between 5 and 15 engraved blocks

were moved to approximately 15 different locations in Queensland by rail (Figure 5) and truck. The physical operation was completed by December 1972.

Samples were selected to satisfy archaeological requirements, and all styles, techniques and motifs which existed at the site were represented and often duplicated (Sutcliffe nd). All blocks were large, some weighing 3 to 5 tonnes, the majority weighing $\frac{3}{4}$ of a tonne (Sutcliffe nd). It is estimated that this project removed approximately one third of the site (Ulm and Lilley 1995: iii), amounting to over 100 tons of rock (Sutcliffe 1972b: 4). “The work provided an unusual opportunity for close study of this type of Aboriginal relic, and the wide distribution will ensure that maximum value will be obtained from them, both by academics and lay people” (Sutcliffe nd).

The Advisory Committee recommended the Museum be the repository under the Aboriginal Relics Act, 1967, with a mandate to care for such collections (Williams et al nd: 2). Due to the physical size of the collection could not be housed in the ‘old museum building’, located at Gregory Terrace, in the city of Brisbane. The decision was taken that the blocks be apportioned, to institutions and non-institutions on a “semi-permanent loans” (Anon 1972d) or perpetual loans (Anon 1972e). Institutions were instructed they had custodial responsibility on behalf of the Crown, but that the relics remained the property of the Crown (Anon 1972c). Bartholami, Director of the QM (and a member of the Advisory Committee under the 1967 Act) considered those going to non-institutional locations should have a record kept, but not to be registered into the QM collections while “all material being held in institutions should receive QM Registration numbers, effected after delivery of the items” (Bartholami 1972). However all were given QE numbers and were registered into the Queensland Ethnography (QE) collection, used for Queensland archaeological collections acquired under non-scientific or non-research circumstances. These objects were amongst the

first major collections of Aboriginal archaeological objects to be incorporated into the QM collections under the Act.

The institutional care and management of these objects would become a significant problem. The lack of official documentation has, with the passage of time, resulted in lack of awareness of the custodian's role in care and maintenance on behalf of the crown, leading to accidental abandonment, and in some cases, disputed ownership. At the time of registration, little information about the site, the removal process or localities engravings were transported to was provided to the Museum, and with some staff feeling that the Museum was excluded from any subsequent on-site management of the engraved blocks. There was ambiguity whether the State Government or Museum was responsible for the continued care and maintenance of the engravings at their various locations. Some were moved to new localities due to the changing circumstances of the institutions where they had originally been located.

Contrary to the primary aim of the removal as 'preservation' in many cases, the physical condition of the objects deteriorated. The majority were now located in the open, affording little protection from the elements and less than suitable management or environmental situations (Robins memo 31/8/01). Although hard to discern even in 1972, 40 years of sustained environmental exposure had considerably weathered the engravings, removing or dulling many motifs. In some cases the blocks were seen as landscaping rocks rather than culturally significant objects (e.g. Figure 6). Environmental concerns included foliage and tree overgrowth, leaf litter accumulation, fence designs which encourage climbing, lack of current signage, or removal of original signage, poor drainage, algal growth, physical, chemical (smog) and environmental weathering, physical scratching and reports of graffiti and wilful and accidental damage (Ianna 2001). Superimposition of the original site map onto a view of the location on Google Earth reveals that the site may not have been constantly submerged as was predicted (Figure 7).

Implications for community

Many problems were caused for Indigenous communities by the removal of the petroglyphs. Ulm et al. (1997: 3) argued, “despite making reference to the great scientific significance of the engravings during the removal operation, no mention is made of the hundreds of Aboriginal people whose land the engravings were part of. No thought given to the consulting local Aboriginal people about the origin and history of the engravings. No thought given to the fact that the engravings were significant and that removing them may have had an impact on their significance.” This kind of treatment of an Aboriginal cultural site is now considered socially and morally inappropriate having been “acquired without free and informed consent and/or in violation of tradition” and “in contravention of customs” (Pickering 2015: 429).

Not long after the completion of the project it was reported that the petroglyphs were sacred. The Aboriginal Relics Committee minuted that “Mr O’Chin mentioned that some of the older people from Cherbourg had mentioned to him that the rocks should not have been shifted as they were sacred, and would bring bad luck if removed” (Anon 1972d). In the 1970s, an interview with an elderly European local resident provided additional information. She recounted that “Aboriginal women used to bathe their children in the rock pools of the outcrop”, her belief was that the children were responsible for the engravings, and also recalled that Aboriginal people coloured the engravings with ochre when they painted themselves” suggesting ceremonial function for the site (Sutcliffe 1972a: 6, Rola-Wojciechowski 1983: 29; Ulm et al 1997: 1).

In 1982, Eades recorded an interview with an Aboriginal man, indicating “that the story belonging to the rock formation is restricted, as it is sacred, and not available to the uninitiated” (1982: 72), suggesting the secret-sacred restricted nature of the site, related to male sacred activities. Similarly, an unpublished document stated “the area is believed to

have been a ceremonial area for tribal rituals, and the engravings were possibly used in the education of young boys” (Sutcliffe nd). Thus, the site “may have served important ceremonial and territorial functions” (Williams et al. nd: 3). In general terms “sacred sites are places that are significant because they mark a particular act of a creation being ... often linked by the story of a travelling ancestor being, and as such they can connect groups of Aboriginal people across vast areas of the continent” (Central Land Council 2015). A general summary of the role of ancestral beings in the creation of the site can be gleaned via a recent summary by Pickering (2015: 431):

“According to Aboriginal tradition, the world, its physical features, its animals, plants, people and their languages and cultures, were created by the activities of sacred ancestral beings. These beings were imbued with a creative spirit that remains at the sites of their activities. These creative beings could manifest in human, animal, plant or object form, and could exist in many sizes and guises and forms simultaneously. In Aboriginal tradition, these beings remain alive in the landscape, for example as hills, rivers, springs, trees and native animals. In ochre quarries, for example, the ochre can be the manifestation of the blood and fat of an ancestral being. In applying the ochre to secular tools, ceremonial objects, paintings and the bodies of the living and the dead alike, the power of the ancestral being is also transferred.”

At the time there was no provision in the Act recognising Aboriginal ownership of heritage or recognition of sacred sites. Now policy makers understand that the disrespect or desecration of such sites can cause great harm to those dependent on the site, as well as those responsible for the disrespect. Damage to secret-sacred sites and objects is often “blamed for illnesses and deaths that follow” (Pickering 2015: 439).

Between 1993 and 2003 the BRE were the focus of a concerted documentation and repatriation effort, seeking the return of these important objects to community. This desire

emerged during initial discussions with community concerning archaeological aspects of the Gooreng Gooreng Cultural Heritage Project (GGCHP) lead by the University of Queensland's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies Unit (ATSISU UQ) staff Michael Williams, Ian Lilley and Sean Ulm. Issues that mattered for community stretched much further than archaeology and included educational initiatives, language recording and maintenance and repatriation of cultural property, specifically communities expressed concern about the well-being of two rock art sites broken up and removed in the past from the Bundaberg region, one of which was the BRE (Ulm et al 1997: 1). Many Aboriginal people identified the site as an important part of cultural heritage (Williams et al nd) with cultural and religious significance.

The GGCHP placed the BRE in broader disciplinary discussions concerning the appropriation of Indigenous heritage and the colonial culture of archaeology (e.g. McNiven and Russell 2005). In a review of the case history, Ulm et al. (1997: 3) wrote “the development and institutionalisation of heritage management since the mid-1960s has acted to dispossess and marginalise Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Indigenous Australians have historically been excluded from this field of social action as significance assessment has been based on values established by Western intellectual traditions. Thus, legislation has operated to exclude Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander worldviews and intellectual tradition from cultural heritage management practice. As Bob Ellis noted “the paradigm suggested that the actual cultural practitioners were extinct, prehistoric populations ... Consequently Aboriginal communities ... were considered largely irrelevant to archaeological endeavour and by extension, peripheral to the process of identifying and recording cultural heritage places ... Viewed in this context, Aboriginal moves toward the control of cultural heritage is a poignant symbol of the assertion of cultural identity”.

Higher degree research theses were also completed charting the individual perspectives of community members attempting to understand and reconcile what had happened to the site and to the objects. Julie Appo, a Gooreng Gooreng woman, interviewed community members about their feelings of the destruction and removal of the site, documenting that “the removal was a catastrophe for Gooreng Gooreng people for whom the engravings constituted critical physical evidence linking them with their traditional lands” (Howie-Willis 1999: 111). Appo wrote “although the engravings are now widely dispersed Gooreng Gooreng people regard them as ‘part of their identity ... and monuments to their living, continuous culture” (Howie-Willis 1999: 111). In her work as an artist Appo is actively reclaiming this heritage (Nolan et al 2003). Similarly Woolford (2003) examined the changing rights of the Gooreng Gooreng people to cultural heritage in relation to the BRE.

The clear sentiment was that the engravings should be returned to Bundaberg to the ownership and custodianship of Traditional Owners. In early 1993 the Gooreng Gooreng Land Council Aboriginal Corporation (GLCAC) expressed their desire, and the desire amongst Aboriginal people in the Bundaberg region, to repatriate the engravings to a purpose-built keeping place in the Bundaberg area. The GLCAC and the Department of Environment and Heritage lodged a joint grant application to the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies to employ a stone conservator to assess the conservation and formulate a plan for their in situ protection and suitability for movement, and a subsequent report was provided by QM Senior Conservator at the request of the ATSIU, UQ (Ianna 2001).

Repatriation was raised with Queensland Museum and the Queensland Museum Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Consultative Committee (QMATSICC) which were supportive of the need (Williams et al nd: 2). It was important that the repatriation program was undertaken as an initiative of and under the direction and control of the Aboriginal

community. Aboriginal aspirations, worldviews and intellectual traditions were included as a vital component of the repatriation and care (Lilley and Ulm 1999: 1). Repatriation was a key element of the GGCHP co-ordinated by the ATISU and in collaboration with the GLC. This first effort was a collaborative project undertaken with GLCAC, ATISU and Queensland Department of Environment. The project sought to locate the dispersed engravings, and any associated information (Ulm et al 1995: iv). Staff from UQ undertook a comprehensive survey of the location of the blocks, relocating the majority of them. At the completion of the project 85 blocks were identified (or as many as 96, as one block was divided into several pieces), seven short of the original 92.

Discussions were entered in to with the Burnett Shire Council Mayor, concerning the possibility of setting aside some council land which could be used as a Cultural Keeping Place, and the council set up a working party. Two scenarios emerged concerning repatriation back to country. One proposal from some members of the Aboriginal community was for the objects to be submerged in the river from whence they came to 'heal' the site. At the time this appeared to be illegal under Queensland Law, and the Burra Charter of ICOMOS to which Australia is a signatory (Ulm et al 1997: 4). As Williams et al. noted "this position is a Western scientific position driven by archaeological values which equates conservation with preservation", citing McNiven (1994: 5) "for many non-Western peoples, conserving the significance of a site or element of cultural heritage may entail allowing its non-preservation in a physical sense". Alternatively, it was suggested they become the focus for an Aboriginal Cultural Centre, providing a locus for contemporary Aboriginal cultural activities and provide a place for traditional knowledge to be passed on. The engravings could be housed at a safe, politically neutral, undercover storage facility in the Bundaberg district. Native Title was yet to be resolved, as was a consensus as to their final deposition.

Changing legislative context provided new opportunities for ownership of cultural heritage and for repatriation. By 2003, the Queensland Government enacted the Aboriginal Cultural Heritage Act 2003, recognising that Indigenous people are the primary guardians, keepers and knowledge holders of their cultural heritage, with recognition of Aboriginal ownership of human remains and secret-sacred material, as well as cultural heritage removed from land. Detailed considerations of the repatriation of Indigenous cultural property, including secret-sacred objects, were being discussed by 2006 (Truscott 2006). Currently, “there is no legislation in Australia, Federal or State, that compels repatriation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander human remains or objects”, however there is explicit support from governments for the return of secret-sacred objects through Return of Indigenous Cultural Property program (RICP) (Pickering 2015: 248) which most regularly deals with Ancestral Remains, burial goods and secret-sacred objects.

In 2014 the need for repatriation was again raised by community, and a renewed push was made by Traditional Owners and QM. This was precipitated by the ‘discovery’ of a set of engravings at the Bingera Sugar Mill, where they had lain since 1972 (Ulm 1994). It was proposed they be moved to the Bundaberg Wellbeing Centre as the focus of display. As the objects were moved without consultation with the Port Curtis Coral Coast Aboriginal Corporation (PPCCAC), the PPCCAC asked they be moved back to the site. During this process the nature of the engravings as sacred was stated, QM’s responsibility emerged and discussions began between Department of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Partnerships (DATSIP), QM and PPCCAC began. A meeting was held in Bundaberg between QM and PPCC. Formal loans agreements are being issued to current institutional holders, to ensure clarity of ownership and for appropriate care and maintenance at their current locations until repatriation can occur. Several visits have been made to Brisbane from community under the RICP, to provide guidance, discuss and plan for repatriation, and to ensure Traditional Owner

requests under the ACHA 2003 are enacted, which include care and maintenance, conservation, appropriate signage, building protective fencing and culturally appropriate rules for interacting with the BRE.

The repatriation plan remains little altered since 1993. It suggests a special consultative committee be set up to guide the process and the project to be run by a community member. The plan involves formally declaring the engravings as sacred, negotiating suitable land in Bundaberg to house the repatriated engravings. Support and funding from the RICP would be sought. Discussion involving all stakeholders (relevant community groups, government, museum, current custodians) to ensure group consensus, to resolve ownership ambiguities, determine protocols, personnel, responsibilities and the nature of final disposition of the engravings. Comprehensive conservation assessments are required prior to and during removal, and to establish a suitable environment at their final destination, and a conservation plan developed, minimising damage during repatriation. Community would be provided with all related documentation, tracings, photographs, and offer to collaborate regarding display and placement of the engravings as close as possible to their original location and position. Smoking ceremonies should be held at each location at the time of removal, and when they are back together on country, attended by community. Whatever the outcome, “it is essential that goodwill and reconciliation are promoted” (Williams et al nd: 4).

Discussion: What is at stake regarding their repatriation?

In order to repatriate these objects sensitively we have to understand what is at stake for Indigenous stakeholders. There are specific issues that seem particularly important in the repatriation of the BRE objects that are tied to the specific history of their creation and the specific values for the community. When the engraved blocks were removed from the site the

activity was framed as rescuing the engravings, on preserving their universal heritage and scientific value for the state, with the engravings understood as relics of the past. Discussions with community suggest quite a different interpretation of events. Some key aspects of this are captured in a recent interview with one of the traditional owners, Michael Hill.

The original decision to remove a sample of petroglyphs from the site was based on the idea that the engraved motifs required preservation. However, from an Indigenous point of view the removal of the engravings damaged the integrity of an important place.

“No-one has asked why were those things there? It’s very important. They played a very important role in ceremony, in travelling corridors, as a meeting place, they mean a lot of things. I see the landscape in my head – a map - the sites, the corridors, where they all fit – bang! And I see that rock art place and I see there are reasons for it – ‘oh, that fits that part’. I remember the old people used to live out bush, we’d hear them talking about these places.” (Hill 2015).

“What did it achieve? What did they achieve by doing it? If they would have left them where they were, it shouldn’t have caused them any harm, we wouldn’t be sitting around tables trying to figure out how to get all these blocks back up there, how are we going to protect them. So I don’t know, what was the reason for removing them? They said it was to protect them. You protect them by leaving them where they are. So that has created a lot of problems now for us.” (Hill 2015)

Within an Indigenous framework, aspects of culture are a birthright that is inherited and must be passed on, with individuals having responsibilities and rights within that culture. The place and the engravings are both precious and important. None of this is captured in the distinctively Western notion of universal heritage value.

“These objects were left to us, and for us that is a very significant cultural inheritance. We have been given this to take care of it. For 60,000 years they took care of it, we need to

maintain the heritage that was left by them. It's up to you as an individual, as an Aboriginal person how much you want to care and share for your elders, and the heritage that was left to us. That heritage, money can't buy that; that is intangible. And that's my heritage and I'm proud of it. That's why I want to do something about it. Get these blocks, put them back there, put them in their proper order" (Hill 2015).

"It's sad to see the heritage for the old people left us, that had a significant part in their lives and was left for us to carry on, that it's just been treated in a disrespectful manner, broken up and distributed, taken around and just dropped here and there" (Hill 2015).

"I want to be involved in caring for them and in repatriating them because it's my birthright, its part of me. Part of my DNA, and it's part of the other people out there too ... we all need to work together to get it back in its environment as soon as possible and secure it there. And then we can do something with it, to show our kids and the wider community and the rest of the world. That's what gives me the right to be involved in it, and if anyone else who wants to be a part of it (from community)" (Hill 2015).

The engravings and the place that they annotated should not be seen as a relic of a past culture but as a resource for the maintenance and reproduction of a living culture, entailing rights and obligations to pass on cultural knowledge.

"Our cultural sites are not dead. They're still breathing, that's what I want to do - revive this and give it a breath of life, so it keeps breathing, not only for our community but to the non-Aboriginal community and the rest of the world" (Hill 2015).

"I'm getting up in years. I see my role as teaching the next generation. I want to revive the language again and enliven culture: the sites, the ecosystems, and how they interact, how our people managed them, why they managed it and why people went to these places, did what they did. There's reasons for these things that I need to teach the younger people about - I need sit them down in the bush and teach them, and not only about the

physical things but the emotional things – how we deal with problems, how they connect” (Hill 2015).

“It’s about teaching the kids their heritage – taking them out to places and telling them the stories, looking at the art, using the tracings and photos – cos they are a bit weathered - and showing them. And maybe, talk to the group about how to retouch them to bring them up a little bit. I think it is important for people that they go back to their rightful place” (Hill 2015).

The processes of repatriation can place people in an uncomfortable position in dealing with government processes. As Curtis (2006: 123) states, “as people articulate their claims for ... objects now in western hands, they are forced to do so in ways that may be unlike their traditional beliefs, ultimately affecting their view of themselves. The historical relationships between the people from whom something was collected and those who are claiming it today may be very complex and ambivalent...this does not mean that objects should not be repatriated, but that these are issues which must be confronted and discussed before meanings can be properly considered”.

“Another thing is that people need to understand is, if you own it, you are going to have to give the time and effort to it. It’s going to cost. It’s costing me, as an Aboriginal person, to be involved in this” (Hill 2015).

Conclusion

As museum workers, we often reflect on the tangled histories of objects or collections and the many voices therein (Curtis 2006). There are clear parallels with community perspectives and the benefits of repatriation: the promotion of healing and reconciliation, respect and understanding of Indigenous cultures, positive role models for younger generations, of keeping culture, families and communities strong in response to contemporary

challenges, cultural revitalisation, confidence and self-determination, and self-control of cultural heritage, sites, landscapes. As Pickering (2015: 440) states, “repatriation is more than the just the return of an object, it is the return of authority, the return of responsibility, and the return of an important part of a groups’ social, religious and historical identity”.

Worldwide, museums are dealing with issues of repatriation of culturally sensitive material (e.g. Batty 2005; Curtis 2006; Museums Australia Inc 1995, 1996; Pickering 2015; Welch and Ferguson 2007). Aboriginal Australian secret-sacred objects are a “specific category of object, which have strong cultural restrictions as to access and viewing” (Pickering 2015: 428). These are “objects restricted from being viewed by, or sometimes even known to, the uninitiated and to members of the opposite sex. They are used in restricted ceremonies. Most are related to male sacred activities” (Pickering 2015: 431).

In removing these petroglyphs from their original context, a series of problematic objects were created, with significant implications for community and for the museum. From a community point of view the blocks represent an opportunity to reclaim part of their cultural heritage, but with complexities created by the fact that engravings that were intended as features of a place have been turned into mobile objects. From a museum and RICP perspective, they are challenging because of the historical circumstances of collection and incorporation into the state collection, their sheer physical size, their scattered distribution, that they have been ‘out of sight and out of mind’ for much of the time, and multi-stakeholder negotiations surrounding care and custodianship. Properly and respectfully repatriating these objects will require a large multi-year project led by community with the full support of community, museum and government. This particular case is in stark contrast to more ‘typical’ repatriations, which raises many new points of consideration and negotiation.

Abbreviations

ACHA Aboriginal Cultural Heritage Act 2003

ARC Australian Research Council

ATSIS UQ Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Heritage Studies Unit

BIWSC Bundaberg Irrigation and Water Supply Commission

BRE Burnett River Engravings

DAIA Department of Aboriginal and Island Affairs

GGCHP Gooreng Gooreng Cultural Heritage Project

GLCAC Gooreng Gooreng Land Council Aboriginal Corporation

PCCCAC Port Curtis Coral Coast Aboriginal Corporation

QM Queensland Museum

QMATSICC Queensland Museum Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Consultative
Committee

UQ The University of Queensland

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