



On the need for cultural heritage practice to pivot to a new Australia

Michael Slack

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On the need for cultural heritage practice to pivot to a new Australia

Michael Slack^{a,b} 

^aScarp Archaeology, Sydney, Australia; ^bARC Centre of Excellence for Australian Biodiversity and Heritage, College of Arts, Society and Education, James Cook University, Cairns, Australia

Fifty years ago Australian archaeologists would have had no idea just how many of us there would be now and how a largely academic interest has become a profession employing hundreds of people throughout the country. In 1973, this would not have even been possible. Fieldwork in remote areas not serviced by airlines, rather by dirty old Landrovers and long-distance drives; maps and compasses rather than hand-held tablets and GIS programs as the standard; aerial maps rather than satellite imagery and drones; and at the end of it all the daunting prospect of typing a report on an actual typewriter.

Technology has expanded our horizons of what is possible, but has training and competency kept up? What do the demands of industry and a profession eager to benefit from resource booms mean for standards and the quality of research in cultural heritage? And how have the effects of Juukan Gorge, new legislation, and COVID-19 altered our professional landscape?

I would contend that over the last 10–15 years there has been an unfortunate trend towards mediocrity. Junior archaeologists are regularly placed in situations with responsibilities and pressures well beyond their training and experience, resulting in poor heritage outcomes. Large companies have snapped up graduates and expect them to be able to assume responsibility for significant projects and heritage. The result has been that large areas of the country and Aboriginal cultural places have been ‘cleared’ for development with little interaction or empowerment of Traditional Owners.

That is until 24 May 2020 (and then the effects of two years of COVID). What happened that day at Juukan Gorge, and its repercussions, were felt not just through heritage practice but resonated with the wider Australian public. Many of us have experienced first-hand how the effects of the destruction of a single cultural place has altered the path of

cultural heritage practice and legislation. My experience of the last few years has been that CHMPs (Cultural Heritage Management Plans), ILUAs (Indigenous Land Use Agreements) and Co-Management Plans are finally more balanced, and recognise the significance of Aboriginal cultural heritage and the rights of Traditional Owners. However, on the flip side of this new normal has been a Government (at least in Western Australia) that has used the destruction of Juukan Gorge for their own political purposes; positioning it in their reimagining of an antiquated *Aboriginal Heritage Act 1972* as old as me; from the time of map and compass and preceding Native Title; into a new system purporting to support and benefit Aboriginal people and communities. However, in the absence of promulgated Regulations and funding for Aboriginal representative organisations, the future of the Act, and with it, cultural heritage practice, is in limbo. From what is known in Western Australia, much of the mechanics of the new Western Australian Act are the same as the previous legislative regime. My experience is that decisions regarding cultural places and their protection are always political and not always based on the best level of heritage advice.

And so, the challenge looking forward for cultural heritage practice is twofold; first to ensure the quality of advice is of a high standard and consistent, and secondly that archaeologists of the next 50 years are well equipped for the challenges ahead.

The effects of COVID have seen many of the best and brightest in the industry return to the Academy, seeking higher awards, skill sets and specialisations. This is great, but it leaves a void in the profession, and I wonder what sort of profession they might return to in another 2–3 years. There is a real need throughout Australia at this time for heritage services, and with that comes the resultant pressure, faster turn-arounds, and inevitably lower

CONTACT Michael Slack  michael.slack@scarp.com.au  Scarp Archaeology, Sydney, Australia.

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quality services. Junior archaeologists again are promoted quickly, and expert level advice compromised. But how long will this cycle last, and what will the new legislation mean going forward?

I think we face a massive challenge over the next few years in Australian archaeology. The challenge of relevance. Traditional Owners will increasingly (rightly) assert their primacy in interpretations of their past and the significance of their Country, and directly negotiate this with industry and governments. In a new legislative landscape reshaped by treaty and agreement-making, what will the role of the cultural heritage professional look like, and for all those who return to industry with new PhDs, what will their future prospects be? Some are likely to work for and with Indigenous businesses and representative organisations in roles associated with, but not directly based on their training. Some will end up as technical advisors writing reports that are unread and unloved on the shelves of industry, while others might look elsewhere. I have and continue to argue that for cultural heritage advisers to be of relevance in the future we need to strive to

answer the issue of relevance, and the primary way we do this is to ensure our standards of advice are beyond reproach, and to publish.

Australian Archaeology has provided the primary venue for the publication of papers in cultural heritage management for 50 years. I sincerely hope that in another 50 years this is still the case, and that those of us engaged in private practice do all that we can to publish, even if it is regarding that interesting survey we just did, or that rare artefact our teams stumbled upon last week. The results of consulting work are significant, constitute research, and need to be read for us to be relevant in the future.

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ORCID

Michael Slack  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-8718-9189>