



Sacredness in the Tasmanian Wilderness World Heritage Area

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■ Abstract

In the 1980s Aboriginal Tasmanian heritage helped shape the declaration of the Tasmanian Wilderness World Heritage Area and clarified environmental powers of the Australian government. The rediscovery of sacred cave markings in the Southwest National Park was a focal point for both actions. Since then, in Tasmania, the influence of the sacred has waned. In 2016 a new plan of management for the Tasmanian Wilderness was designed to include Aboriginal Tasmanian inputs, which latterly resulted in the creation of a joint management framework to act as a new governance arrangement. The use of free, prior and informed consent conditions for Aboriginal engagement led to a re-awakening of the sacred in planning for a world heritage area, which in turn led to a collaborative process of designing joint management.

KEY WORDS: Tasmanian Wilderness, Aboriginal, Sacred, Joint management

■ 1. Introduction

1.1 An overview and brief description of the significance of the Tasmanian Wilderness World Heritage Area, including natural and cultural values.

I am a senior trawlulwuy woman of tebrakunna country, and our peoples, otherwise known as Aboriginal Tasmanians, hold great connection to the Tasmanian Wilderness World Heritage Area (TWWHA), or TWWHA country. Palaeolithic ochre hand-stencils and engraved sacred markings found

within limestone caves of the Southwest National Park of Tasmania, Australia, and of my peoples, became central to Australian Government constitutional reform and formal listing of TWWHA country in 1983 (High Court of Australia 1983). The High Court of Australia heard a case that year, commonly known as the Franklin Dam Case, where the December 1982 United Nations Educational,

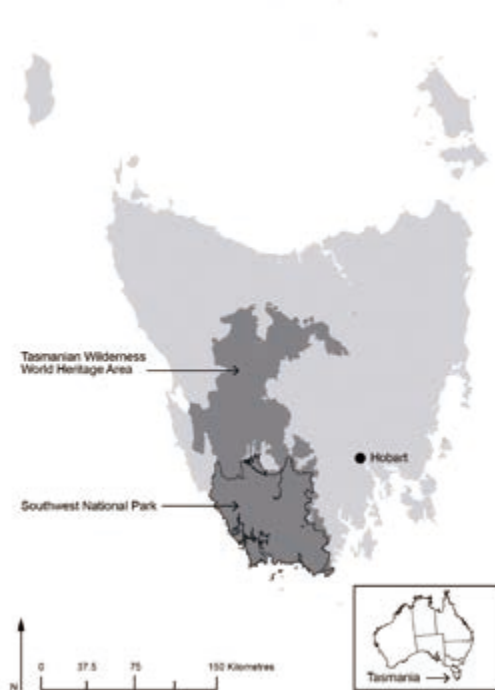
Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) proclamation of TWWHA country, and the Australian government obligations under the World Heritage Convention, clashed with the Tasmanian state government's desire to build a hydro-electric dam in the middle of it (Murchison 1995). In winning the case and legitimising the TWWHA country nomination, the Australian government also resolved an issue of constitutional powers, namely their right to make environmental legislation that may supersede the state's rights or desires (Godden & Peel 2005). In the High Court judgement, one of four reasons that stopped the dam construction, and influenced clarity over constitutional powers, gave regard to the unlawful act of destroying cultural heritage, namely our ancestral sacred markings upon cave walls of TWWHA country (High Court of Australia 1983).

TWWHA country is listed as of Outstanding Universal Value (OUV) under three "cultural" criteria

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(related only to Aboriginal peoples) and four “natural” criteria and in 2017 the listed area comprises approximately 1.58 million hectares, or one-fifth of Tasmania’s land mass, including the Southwest National Park [Map 1]. Until late 2016, the vast majority of TWWHA country was solely Tasmanian government managed. Public interests, such as tourism, conservation, local government, science and Aboriginal interests, were represented through the Tasmanian Government’s National Parks and Wildlife Advisory Council (NPWAC) as the lead body through which concerns could be raised in a formal environment.

As a past member of NPWAC, I have cared for sacred TWWHA country. For me, the sacred cave markings speak of pathways and cradles for knowledge and connection to this special country – sacredness is of all the things that comprise



Map 1: A map of TWWHA country © Jen Evans.

TWWHA country, yet the cave markings are a potent and tangible signifier of our belonging. They have affected me deeply; walking across the side of a deep river gully, crouching low at their altar base of a cave floor to look up and across a deep rock divide as the torchlight frames my view and awe in their presence. They remind me of the Old People who walk with me and their lessons: The markings deserve continuance

through conservation not only for my own peoples, but for others to share and respect in TWWHA country.

Yet the lack of framing of what constitutes the sacred in TWWHA country was incidental in its role as a lever for positive social mood shifts in Australia towards the environment and conservation, particularly at the highest judicial and parliamentary level in the early 1980s (Cove 1995). Our sacred places had the most august beginnings in modern Australian conservation measures, however the first plan of management (PoM) for TWWHA country, does not mention the word ‘sacred’ or frame cultural criteria as meaningful to us as peoples. In 1999, the Tasmanian Parks and Wildlife Service produced the Tasmanian Wilderness World Heritage Area Management Plan 1999, as the first statutory document guiding management actions and objectives. Within it our interests are represented within the things we produced, such as ‘rock art’, and possessing meaning only in cultural, not sacred, values. The focus was not that of us, as contemporary peoples with connections to sacred country, but rather that of a managing authority assuming the right to speak on behalf of a distant and past version of us: the archaeological value of past objects (Langford 1983).

■ 2. Current management arrangements (Legislations, institutions, resources)

With the first PoM long outdated, in 2013 the Tasmanian Government committed to producing a new PoM for TWWHA country (Department of Primary Industries, Parks, Water and Environment 2016a). This presented a chance to rectify the ongoing structural displacement of Aboriginal Tasmanians and sacred values of TWWHA country to the margins in the management of the site, such as management authorities devoting only half of one per cent of 2012’s total \$AUD7 million TWWHA country budget to conservation of the cultural criteria (Australian Government 2012). The management of TWWHA country, from the first PoM, is characterised as a ‘culture of nature’, where country becomes void of our peoples in favour of the disinterested bureaucrat and defender ecologist (Willems-Braun 1997), and a ‘fences and fines’ mindset determined conservation themes. This is one

reason why sacredness has been unacknowledged and uncharacterised, as my peoples have not been properly resourced or visible within the process of caring for TWWHA country.

To overcome the planning disadvantage to our peoples through the imbalanced focus on natural criteria, the Tasmanian government employed the services of an Aboriginal Liaison Officer (Ms Fiona Hamilton) to co-ordinate our input and engagement activities (Department of Primary Industries, Parks, Water and Environment 2016a) [see Plate 1]. Our Aboriginal Tasmanian engagement process began in late 2013 and ended in December 2016 with the approvals from the Tasmanian and Australian governments, and oversight from the World Heritage Committee, for the final draft report, Tasmanian Wilderness World Heritage Area (TWWHA) Plan 2016, to become the new statutory document guiding future management and objectives.

Free, prior and informed consent (FPIC) conditions for our engagement was a critical factor in leading the work of the Aboriginal Liaison Officer. A Reactive Monitoring Mission from UNESCO to TWWHA country in November 2015, to review the PoM drafting process, stated that “the quality and level of participation in the process appear high by global standards” (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization 2016, p. 10) and includes our engagement. The conditions of Aboriginal FPIC included commercial in confidence processes and, within the PoM, referral to ethical guidelines (Department of Primary Industries, Parks, Water and Environment 2016b) to provide a cultural safety around participants. This meant that each person who contributed could be guaranteed their knowledges would not, for example, be used inappropriately or details shared with others without permission.

The reinforcing FPIC circle of cultural safety allowed our peoples to introduce notions of sacred back into the planning process for TWWHA country. In the new PoM, Aunty Patsy Cameron’s Welcome to Country message opens the dialogue about sacredness and connection, when she states that:

Aboriginal people shaped the landscape using ancient firing practices, passed on since the

first ancestors walked across the Milky Way. Thus the TWWHA is of global significance for all humanity. It holds the secrets of dynamic, culturally diverse and spiritually rich peoples... (Department of Primary Industries, Parks, Water and Environment 2016b, pg. v).

In Section 2.1 Cultural Values of the new PoM (Department of Primary Industries, Parks, Water and Environment 2016b, p. 38) the word ‘sacred’ is mentioned five times, largely in the context of our peoples today holding knowledge or having connection to the sacred of TWWHA country. Another context in which the sacred is important is in the act of healing, or reconnecting with country that has previously been managed in exclusion of us. One participant states in the new PoM that by “getting to know our land once more, we are able to re-vision that land – that is, we are able to reconnect to the sacred” (Department of Primary Industries, Parks, Water and Environment 2016b, p. 39). For our peoples, we were able to use sacredness as a theme that bridges the listing of our cultural values - as previously understood to be archaeological and of the past - with the vitality of a contemporary peoples that still holds knowledges and aspirations to participate in management planning of TWWHA country.

The freedoms to participate in caring for TWWHA country with respectful attention paid to sacred places, knowledges and processes created a space to further the aims and intent of the new PoM. By this, in rethinking the dispossessing management practices of the 1999 TWWHA country PoM and reviewing outcomes of the Aboriginal engagement FPIC strategy, the managing authorities and our peoples came to agreement that TWWHA country could be jointly managed.

■ 3. Current State of Conservation and Challenges for Continuity

The Tasmanian Wilderness World Heritage Area (TWWHA) Plan 2016 represents the first time a Tasmanian government has approved a plan for a protected area to be jointly managed between current stakeholders and Aboriginal Tasmanian peoples. Within the PoM is Key Desired Outcome 4.1, where “management of Aboriginal cultural

values in the TWWHA is undertaken through a joint management governance arrangement that



Plate 1: Flying across TWWHA country on a reconnection and engagement day © Author supplied.

is supported by a dedicated unit...” (Department of Primary Industries, Parks, Water and Environment 2016b, p. 97). Other Key Desired Outcomes of the PoM (Department of Primary Industries, Parks, Water and Environment 2016) include that interpretation and presentation of the cultural values are determined by our peoples, access to resources and rights to actively participate in management are devolved to us, and that TWWHA country be reassessed as a Cultural Landscape under WHA criteria to reflect our longstanding connections, activities and knowledges. There is a space for us and our connections to the sacred and other values of TWWHA country to be expressed now that our role is elevated to governance partner and joint manager.

One of the tangible outputs of my peoples’ expression of sacredness – the ochre stencils and engravings – has returned in prominence to help guide the future decision-making of TWWHA

country. Some of these sacred messages have been revealed on the front cover of the new PoM [Fig. 1], denoting an importance and reinvigoration of cultural criteria in support of the call to jointly manage TWWHA country. In leading national change in the 1980s and then fading into obscurity, our sacred cave wall messages have remained patient. It is in the Tasmanian Wilderness World Heritage Area (TWWHA) Plan 2016 that concepts of the sacred and an understanding of how people hold, connect to and transmit sacred knowledges have helped shift exclusionary management practices into positive terrain for Aboriginal Tasmanians.

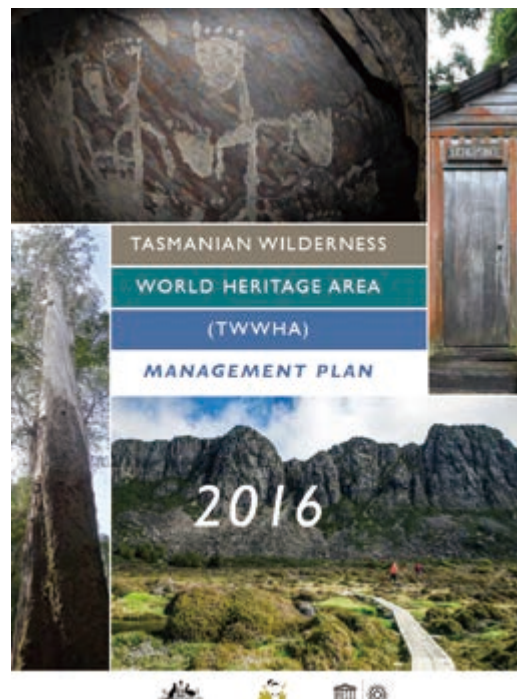


Figure 1: Front cover of the Tasmanian Wilderness World Heritage Area (TWWHA) Plan 2016 © Department of Primary Industries, Parks, Water and Environment.

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