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AUSTRALIA'S ROCK ART HERITAGE: PAST KNOWLEDGE FOR A RICHER FUTURE

Paul S.C. Taçon

What is Australian rock art, why is it important and what is the problem?

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From inner Sydney in New South Wales to the Pilbara of Western Australia, from Tasmania to the Top End of the Northern Territory, from near Brisbane to Cape York in Queensland as many as 100,000 individual rock art sites are thought to still exist, with exciting new discoveries made each year. But because Australia has never had a national data base or a coordinated approach to rock art documentation, conservation and management the extent of Australian rock art is still unknown.

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Australian rock art is extremely important for Indigenous Australians but it is also part of national identity, something that should be a source of great pride for all Australians, as it is in many other countries around the world, including Malaysia. By studying it we can learn about ancient Indigenous Australian cultures, their spirituality, history and relationships to land. The art also informs us

about past periods of climate change, what long extinct animals looked like, Indigenous reactions to the arrival of Asians and Europeans in the past few hundred years and many other aspects of the past unavailable from archaeological excavations.

For Indigenous Australians, rock art sites are history books – their history, our history (see Taçon (2011) for a recent overview of Australian rock art, as well as Flood (1997) and Layton (1992)). They also can be considered as museums and art galleries embedded in natural landscapes. But unlike built museums and galleries they are not very well looked after in terms of having high security, protection from the elements and lots of financial support. Rock art sites are some of the forgotten museums that need attention not only on International Museum Day but year round.

All sites are under threat from natural and cultural forces [e.g. see Lambert (2007), Marshall and Taçon (in press), Rosenfeld (1985)], the latter increasing at an alarming rate. And although Australia has more rock art sites than any other country in the world it has never had a national strategy to manage this important part of its heritage. Despite over a century of research, mostly by dedicated individuals, there has never been a coordinated approach to rock art research, conservation or management at the national, state or territory level.

Today, the negative impact of human activity, such as industrial and urban development, tourism, pollution, introduced feral animals, vandalism, graffiti and poor management, is far greater than natural forces that have always impacted on rock art sites. If we do not develop a national strategy to research, manage and conserve this priceless resource soon a significant aspect of Australia's visual heritage will be lost forever – as much as half in the next 100 years (<http://www.theglobalmail.org/feature/rock-art-riches-the-devastating-cost-of-australias-mining-boom/570/>).

In many countries, including France, Spain and South Africa, rock art is considered so important, precious and vulnerable that millions of dollars is spent each year on research in order to better understand its age, meaning and significance as well as the best ways to present it to the general public and to protect it for future generations. National databases have also been created.

Besides lacking a national database, in Australia little is spent annually caring for rock art. But as Robert Bednarik, convenor of the International Federation of Rock Art Organisations, stated in *The Global Mail* on 11 March 2013 in terms of how other countries spend vast amounts on single sites such as Lascaux in France: 'We are talking tens of millions per year [spent on conserving Lascaux]. Australia has not spent \$10 million on rock art in its entire history' (<http://www.theglobalmail.org/feature/blasting-the-colonial-past/571/>).

Currently, rock art records are scattered across the country, in state and territory archaeological databases, museums, universities, national park archives, heritage centres, local council records, Indigenous institutions and the private records of rock art researchers. There is no central register but a national rock art heritage strategy could help establish one in collaboration with Indigenous communities. Australia is behind many other countries in managing its rock art. Rock art conservation is almost non-existent and large areas are undocumented or poorly recorded. Australian rock art is part of the oldest tangible history in the world; it is truly the nation's crown jewels. Yet for the most part it is unprotected.

The Diversity of Australian Rock Art: An Introduction

There are at least 33 defined rock art regions in Australia, each with particular styles and forms of rock art (Fig. 1). However, certain types of rock art can also be found right across the continent and right