

# Aboriginal Cultural Heritage Regional Studies: an illustrative approach



Department of **Environment and Conservation** NSW



Aboriginal Cultural Heritage Regional Studies: an illustrative approach  
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The background of the top half of the page features a graphic of several hands in various shades of blue, reaching upwards to hold a large white gear. The gear is positioned in the upper right quadrant, with its teeth pointing towards the top right corner. The hands are arranged in a circular pattern around the gear, suggesting a collective effort or support.

# 1 INTRODUCTION

## **to regional studies**

## Definition & purpose

**This report presents a general approach to conducting an assessment of Aboriginal cultural heritage at a regional scale. The field of cultural heritage regional assessment is still in its infancy in Australia. The Department of Environment and Conservation NSW is currently developing a range of tools for Aboriginal heritage regional assessment in NSW. While we expect this field to evolve rapidly over the next few years we also acknowledge the need, at this point in time, to provide our clients with an illustrative approach to regional assessments. As an illustrative model, the present document embodies many of the principles we believe should inform regional assessments. We offer it not as a prescriptive template for such assessments but as a general approach that, with the benefit of feedback from our clients, we look forward to developing and refining in the years ahead.**

**We anticipate a series of publications that will serve as more detailed guides for particular components of the regional assessment and planning process.**

A regional assessment gathers together all existing information about cultural heritage places in a region and, in some cases, may add to the available information (e.g., by carrying out field surveys in the region). The exercise helps us to understand why these places are located where they are and thus helps us to predict where presently unidentified heritage places are likely to be found in the region. It also gives us an overview of the significances or values that these places have for people in our own society today.

The overview provided by a regional assessment helps us understand the relationship between Aboriginal people and the natural environment, the relationship between past and the present, and the relationship between cultural heritage places and the values people give them. A regional assessment gives us an overview of these relationships at a landscape scale (see

Fig. 1). It also provides a context for finer-scale decisions (e.g., site conservation plans, precinct conservation plans, and regulatory decisions).

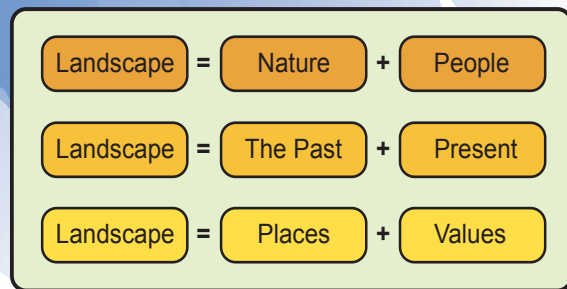


Fig. 1 Elements of a cultural landscape (Phillips 2002)

## Cultural heritage: places & values

For the purposes of this guide, Aboriginal cultural heritage places are grouped into the following categories:

- pre-contact (pre-1788) places
- historical places (post-1788)
- social and spiritual places
- wild resource use places

While much of the work of a regional assessment has to do with identifying and explaining where places are found, and where they are *likely* to be found, it is also critical to document and assess the significance of those places (see Appendix A, 3). We must always remember that we conserve cultural heritage places not for themselves but for the significance that they have for people. We follow the Burra Charter in recognising four broad categories of significance: aesthetic, scientific (e.g., archaeological), historical, and social (see Appendix A, 4).

In acknowledging the in-principle right of Aboriginal people to ownership of their own heritage, we recognise that the social significance of their heritage places is primarily determined by their own communities (see the text box below at right). In canvassing an Aboriginal community about the value that a certain place has for them, a heritage practitioner might ask the following questions:



- Does the place stand out for the community relative to other places?
- Is the place associated with a revered member of the community (e.g., a deceased elder) or is linked to a significant event?
- Has the place been important in shaping the community's identity?
- Is the place a reference point for the community in celebrating its identity?
- Is the place important to the community because of its use over a long period of time?
- Does the place have special cultural attributes that are valued by members of the community?

## Scale, purpose & structure

Regional assessments differ, depending upon:

1. The purpose of the assessment (e.g., for planning; for community interest; for conservation and regulation; for large-scale development projects).
2. The size or scale of the study (e.g., bioregion, local government area, national park, large-scale development project).

These two variables influence the methodology of a regional study. However, there are certain generic methods that can be used for any landscape-level assessment, no matter what the scale or purpose of the study. For instance, a landscape-scale assessment can describe how hundreds of archaeological sites are distributed across a region in relation to the region's physical environment. It can also describe in general terms the association that exists between the personal history of community members and different areas within the region (Ridges 2004a, p. 94).

It is important to realise that Aboriginal people have their own regional perspectives of their heritage, which often integrate the cultural and the natural into a seamless continuum. The account (see box) of a conversation with Aboriginal consultant George Martin from Deniliquin (NSW) during a visit to a Bunyip Waterhole in the Edwards River in the Werai State Forest (as recounted in Pardoe and Martin 2001, p. 132), illustrates this.

The approach to regional assessments outlined in the pages that follow attempts to be inclusive of both the community perspective, as illustrated in the text box below, and the regional perspective derived from working with the archaeological and historical data.

A number of case studies are presented, so that the general or conceptual points we make are balanced by showing how things are done on the ground in the real context of a regional assessment. (Case Studies 1 to 11).

### Hypothetical region

To facilitate the discussion, a hypothetical region (Figure 2) is used as an example throughout this document. This region is characterised by two north-flowing rivers fed by first and second order streams originating from an upland area. This region forms part of a larger catchment area that is also depicted in Figure 2. The more localised area labelled as 'Jack's Creek' is also used to explain specific points.

*He showed us the deep waterhole in the bend and said they were not allowed to swim there as children [historical place]. He then told us what a good fishing spot it is and discussed that [wild resource use place]. He added that about 250 metres downstream there was a sloping area in the river bank where you could get mussels, and that the shallow water there was good for catching bream [wild resource use place]. He said there was a shell-grit oven mound [pre-contact place] nearby which showed there was shallow water because of the presence of mussels. So to George, the shell mound tells him about the environment and what he can do there, and incidentally tells him what his ancestors did there. It is not only the mound that is significant to him but the whole mound and the important aspects of the environment, which is still being used in a traditional way. On a large scale George felt the same way about the whole Werai State Forest, which had been the cultural and spiritual centre of his life when living on nearby Moonacullah Mission [historical place], and still was a very important part of his life. George has been trying to get the State Forests to fulfil their promises of looking after the many sites in the Werai State Forest, and showed us large oven mounds and burial mounds [pre-contact place] which he was trying to get fenced off from cattle and protected from rabbits [link with natural resource management].*

## Further information

Mention in the text of Appendix A followed by a number in brackets signals to the reader that more information about this topic can be found on the Internet. Mention of Appendix B and a number in brackets signals the reader that a specific term is defined in the glossary (Appendix B).

## Four reasons for regional studies

This section briefly describes the four *inter-related* reasons why regional assessments are needed in cultural heritage management. They are:

1. *Predictive modelling*: A regional assessment predicts where presently unidentified places are likely to exist in a region.

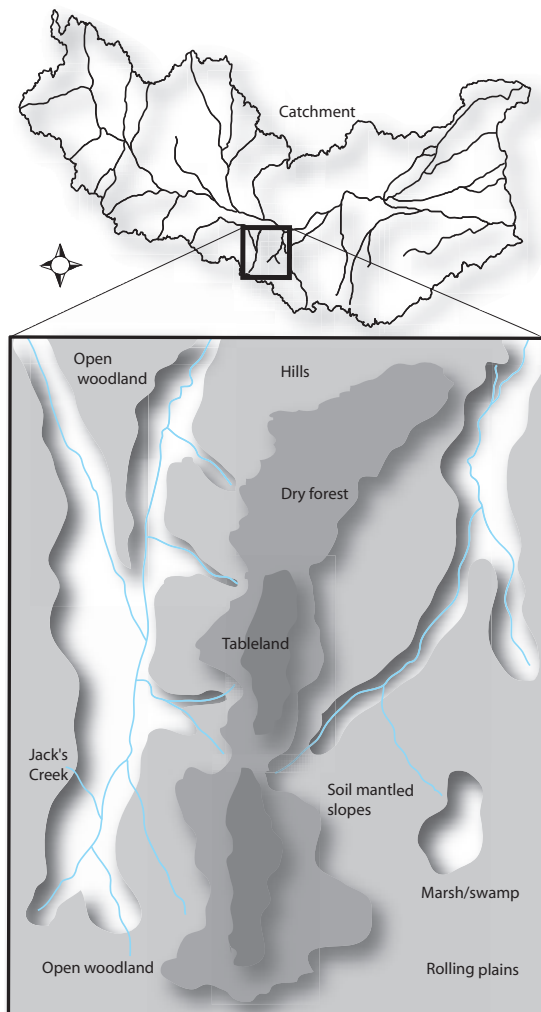


Fig. 2 The hypothetical study region

2. *Cultural landscapes*: A regional assessment provides a landscape perspective on history and culture and is able to show the interrelatedness of individual heritage places.
3. *Strategic conservation*: A regional assessment facilitates conservation planning at a larger scale than that which is possible, for instance, at the scale of an environmental impact assessment (EIA) for a single land development project.
4. *Community benefits*: A regional study provides a number of positive benefits for Aboriginal communities.

Each of these reasons will now be explained in greater detail.

### 1. Predictive modelling

One of the main reasons regional studies are needed is because the number of recorded heritage places in any given region is only a fraction of what is actually out there. For example, a regional study of the Murrumbidgee Province in western NSW identified 918 recorded places. On the basis of the distribution of these 918 places, the researchers estimated that the Murrumbidgee Province contains more than 92 000 unidentified places (Pardoe and Martin 2001, p. v). Figure 3 displays the distribution of identified/recorded places (in black) and unidentified/unrecorded places (in brown) in our hypothetical region.

A regional study requires investigation of the recorded places in order to make predictions about the characteristics of the unrecorded places. These predictive statements have obvious benefits for land planners and managers.

A problem with the spatial distribution of heritage places shown in Figure 3 is that the recorded places have mostly been recorded in the course of EIA archaeological surveys (Goulding 2002, p. 11) and the focus of this recording has been on the remains of Aboriginal pre-contact (pre-1788) occupation. The distribution of the surveys, and thus the places recorded, is skewed towards the areas of the region that happen to have experienced most development activity. They are unlikely to reflect the true distribution of the region's heritage (development activity is represented in Figure 3 as the 'mine survey' to the north-east



and the 'pipeline survey' to the east). Another problem is that the vast majority of recorded places are archaeological sites found in areas of high ground surface visibility (Appendix B, 33). Until relatively recently, very little consideration has been given to wild resource places, or post-contact places. So when we set out to collect information on what has already been recorded in any given region, we will usually find that the vast majority are pre-contact archaeological places.

## 2. Cultural landscapes

*It is the landscapes themselves that ought to be considered heritage, rather than discrete and dispersed 'sites' within them (Byrne and Nugent 2004, p. 73).*

The above quote speaks to the rationale behind regional assessments. The importance of taking a landscape rather than site-based perspective is seen repeatedly in the way Aboriginal people in NSW speak about their heritage.

This landscape perspective is illustrated in a statement of significance relating to two Aboriginal heritage places in the Illawarra region:

*At Hill 60 and Boilers Point, for example, it is not just the sites of the various middens that are significant to the community, but the whole landscape in which people lived, gathered food, built houses, played and worked – the middens and the post-contact archaeology are signs of that life, rather than the only important components (Adams 2003, p. 34).*

As mentioned, regional assessments identify and organise places that exist, or are likely to exist, into groups (or themes). In this regard, a regional study 'makes sense' of the distribution of places in the landscape—a distribution that, at first glance, may appear random and confusing. As shown in Figure 3, the distribution of cultural heritage places is represented as simply 'dots-on-a-map'. When examined as individual entities like this, heritage places provide only limited information. However, taken collectively, they exhibit spatial patterning that reflects the past (and often present) activity of people in the landscape and the movement of these people and their material culture around the landscape. For contemporary Aboriginal people, the significance of individual places is derived from their inter-relatedness within the region. Places

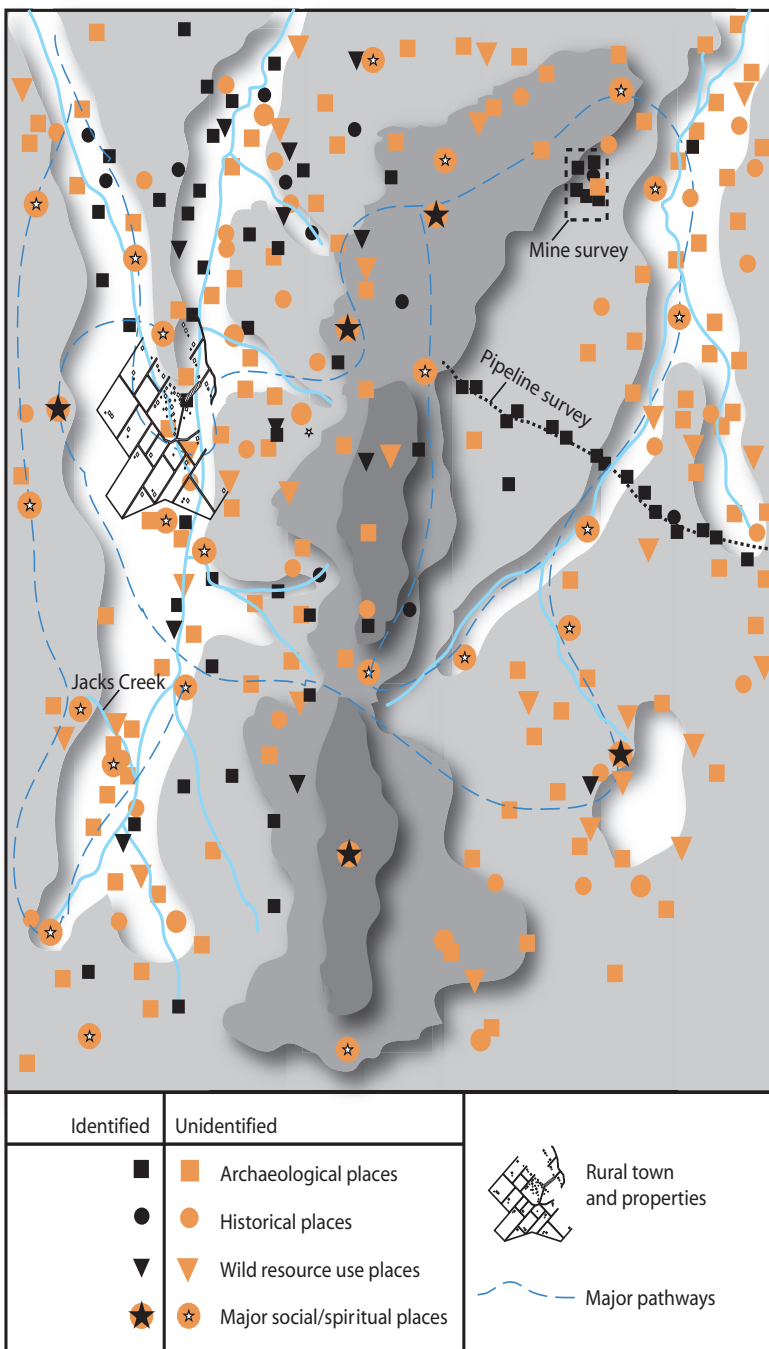


Fig. 3 Identified and unidentified places

or pathways did not exist in isolation when they were in use in the past, and so should continue to be considered as integrated parts of the cultural landscape when examined in the present.

In a regional study, therefore, an objective is to document the 'network of places', rather than a collection of discrete places. This means that any assessment must consider a place or an area in a holistic manner. In other words, places and pathways are to be assessed in their 'landscape context' rather than as individual places. The methodology required to look at the landscape context is described in Section 2, and also in Case Study 2.

In some ways, a landscape approach requires us to do things differently from what we have been used to in the current heritage management field. To explain why, it is useful to briefly consider the history of cultural heritage management in NSW. Legislation for Aboriginal heritage in NSW was enacted in 1969, with an amendment to the National Parks and Wildlife Act giving protection to Aboriginal 'relics.' While this legislation was primarily targeted at regulating fossickers and collectors, the associated government process was primarily concerned with initiating surveys to add archaeological sites to the newly established NSW Aboriginal Sites Register. With the commencement of the Environmental Protection and Assessment Act (EP&A) in 1979, the protection of Aboriginal heritage was to a certain extent subsumed within the EIA process. Given the focus on archaeological sites and objects, the Aboriginal heritage assessment component of EIA also focused on archaeological impacts.

Aboriginal heritage surveys have mostly been conducted by non-Aboriginal archaeologists concerned mainly with identifying, interpreting, and assessing the relative significance of cultural material in terms of its archaeological or scientific value. Any Aboriginal involvement in the process was restricted to secondary roles as archaeological field assistants. There was no consideration of Aboriginal community concerns in relation to places and/or areas to be affected by development beyond archaeological sites.

The regional assessment approach advocated here seeks to go beyond this historical focus by addressing all four of the main categories of Aboriginal cultural heritage places (noted

earlier). Furthermore, it provides a mechanism for assessing the significance of heritage places and areas beyond their own immediate boundaries. It asks how individual heritage places are connected to the larger cultural landscape in which they occur. This type of landscape-scale assessment is a major component of the research work carried out during the course of a regional study. An investigator is required to understand the regional context of an individual place before management recommendations can be formulated. A regional study provides an important resource in this regard.

The following quote helps us understand the cultural relevance of looking at landscapes, as distinct from individual places. It does so by drawing attention to movement as a theme (see also Case Study 7):

*Movement is a constant theme in the documentary and especially the oral sources of our study area. Any reading of Aboriginal histories elsewhere in NSW will show this to be true for the State as a whole ... The emphasis placed on pathways and other routes in our landscape studies stems from a belief in their importance as cultural heritage. We know that the places we call 'sites' are often really just points on pathways (trajectories); they are 'moments' in a journey or trip across a landscape. However, because the heritage system is currently set up around the concept of the 'site', or heritage property, the points on the pathway have tended to dominate our thinking to the extent that the pathway itself is often lost sight of (Byrne and Nugent 2004, p. 126).*

### 3. Strategic conservation

Simply conducting a field survey of a region and plotting site locations on a map—prior to a development—tells us little about the factors underlying site distribution. It allows us to make recommendations only on a place-by-place basis in relation to a specific threat or conservation need. A regional study provides the information from which forward-planning decisions are developed.

The management of recorded heritage places in a region may entail direct protective measures such as erosion control, or the incorporation of a place into a conservation area. The management of the unrecorded places in a region, however, can proceed only when we are able to predict their location. That is, in order to make management recommendations that go



some way to protect the presently unrecorded element of the cultural heritage landscape, we need to identify knowledge gaps, identify under-represented types of places or areas, and conserve representative landforms that we predict will contain a diverse number of places. Much of the following discussion is aimed at explaining how we are able to make such predictions and management recommendations.

#### **4. Community benefits**

A regional study provides a mechanism for Aboriginal people to become involved in the planning and management of their heritage. Too often in the past, Aboriginal people have been given opportunities to participate in the management of their heritage only when it is under the immediate threat of development. This is a reactionary type of involvement and is the least preferred option in the cultural heritage management process.

A regional assessment has the potential to engage Aboriginal communities at an early stage of the heritage planning process. Also, in being inclusive of all the different categories of heritage places it provides more opportunities for community engagement than would have been the case if only pre-contact archaeological sites were involved. The previous focus on pre-contact archaeology put a premium on specialist archaeological skills and methods and tended to marginalise Aboriginal people from the management of their own heritage.

More direct and effective involvement and control of the management process is a common aspiration among Aboriginal people (see Case Study 6).

At the same time, a regional study offers a number of social benefits for the community. Simply participating in the protection of cultural heritage can be a positive experience that brings children and elders together, puts people in touch with their land or 'country', and helps to restore a sense of identity and community belonging. In short, there are at least six benefits that an integrated regional assessment can provide to Aboriginal communities (as listed on the DEC Internet site):

- opportunity to sustain spiritual and cultural activities
  - participation in park management decision-making
  - protection of cultural sites and heritage
  - opportunity to educate people about Aboriginal culture and contribute to reconciliation
  - training and employment opportunities.
- recognition of cultural association with the land or traditional ownership