

HERITAGE INFORMATION SERIES

HERITAGE INTERPRETATION POLICY



NSW GOVERNMENT
Department of Planning

HERITAGE INTERPRETATION POLICY

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HERITAGE INTERPRETATION POLICY

The aim of this policy is to sustain and protect the heritage of NSW through interpretation and to encourage best practice in interpretation.

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THE IMPORTANCE OF HERITAGE INTERPRETATION

The heritage of New South Wales is identified and protected as a means of securing and maintaining landscape, places and objects valued as part of Australian culture. Heritage is a cultural asset, part of the identity of NSW, its regions and communities. Natural and cultural heritage are linked with other aspects of culture such as literature, music, dance, art, food and other creative works and are part of the environment and community life.

Heritage conservation seeks to sustain the values of heritage landscapes, places and objects, individually and collectively, so that the community and visitors can continue to appreciate, experience and learn from them and about them, and so that they can be passed on to future generations.

Heritage interpretation is a means of sharing Australian culture and history within communities and with other communities, new citizens, visitors, and people overseas. It is also a means of passing on the knowledge and appreciation of Australian culture to new generations.

Interpretation is an integral part of the experience of significant heritage places.

Why interpret?

The significance of some heritage items is easy to understand; but for others the values are not obvious and require interpretation. Many items have values that are better understood through interpretation.

Interpretation media including activities and events, signs, publications, audio, video, artworks and trails, can enhance understanding and enjoyment by appealing to different levels of experience and knowledge, as well as to different learning styles

Interpretation can strengthen and sustain the relationships between the community and its heritage.

When to interpret?

Interpretation may be undertaken at any stage in the life of a place or heritage item. Interpretation is an essential part of the experience of a place.

For some heritage items, interpretation is an occasional opportunity, often linked with open days or other community celebrations.

For items which attract visitors, interpretation is an integral component of conservation and management and is undertaken for both educational and recreational purposes.

For other items, the opportunity for interpretation is provided when the use changes or when works are undertaken.

For industrial, places, archaeological sites and agricultural or other landscapes undergoing significant change, interpretation provides a way for people to appreciate the significance of the place before its use changes.

In some places, such as national parks or historic sites and precincts, interpretation has many uses and dimensions in education, recreation, tourism, visitor management and conservation.

HERITAGE INTERPRETATION POLICY STATEMENT

The interpretation of New South Wales' heritage connects the communities of New South Wales with their heritage and is a means of protecting and sustaining heritage values.

Heritage interpretation is an integral part of the conservation and management of heritage items and is relevant to other aspects of environmental and cultural management and policy.

Heritage interpretation incorporates and provides broad access to historical research and analysis.

Heritage interpretation provides opportunities to stimulate ideas and debate about Australian life and values, and the meaning of our history, culture and the environment. The Heritage Office, Department of Planning, is committed to encouraging imaginative, inclusive and accurate interpretation of the heritage of New South Wales and to establishing and sustaining best practices in content, methodology, implementation and evaluation of heritage interpretation.

The Heritage Office aims to:

- promote the interpretation of the heritage of New South Wales;
- acknowledge the associations and meanings of heritage to the community;
- integrate heritage interpretation in environmental and cultural planning in state and local government organisations;
- encourage high standards and skills in heritage interpretation .

DEFINITIONS

These definitions are adapted from definitions in heritage charters and guidelines for use with terms in the NSW Heritage Act.

Aboriginal people(s) with cultural association means Aboriginal people(s) with a cultural or historical association with an area not necessarily deriving from descent from original inhabitants. Consideration must also be given to Aboriginal people who reside in an area where there are no identified traditional owners or Aboriginal people who have traditional association to that country. (see also Traditional owner)

Aboriginal Culture means the culture of a group of people or groups of peoples comprising of the total ways of living built up and passed on from one generation to the next, and evolving over time.

Aboriginal Heritage means the heritage of a group of people or groups of peoples is represented in all that comes or belongs to them by reason of birth and includes their spirituality, language and relationship to land.

Associations mean the special connections that exist between people and an item.

Conservation management plan (CMP) means a document that identifies the heritage significance of an item and sets out policies for retaining that significance and is prepared in accordance with Heritage Council guidelines.

Conservation Management Strategy (CMS) means a document that identifies the impact an activity may have on a heritage significance of an item and sets out measures to minimise the impact of a proposed activity on the heritage significance of the item and is prepared in accordance with Heritage Council guidelines.

Environmental heritage means those places, buildings, works, relics, infrastructure, movable objects, landscapes and precincts, of State or local heritage significance.

Fabric means the physical material of the item including components, features, objects and spaces.

Heritage Impact Statement (HIS) means a document that records the heritage significance of an item by using a Heritage Data form and sets out broad strategies for retaining that significance and is prepared in accordance with Heritage Council guidelines.

Heritage significance refers to meanings and values in relation to the historical, scientific, cultural, social, archaeological, architectural, natural or aesthetic importance of the item. Heritage significance is reflected in the fabric of the item, its setting, use, associations, meanings, records, related places and related objects. Items may have a range of values and meanings for different individuals or groups, over time.

Interpretation means all the ways of presenting the significance of an item. Interpretation may be a combination of the treatment and fabric of the item; the use of the item; the use of interpretive media, such as events, activities, signs and publications, or activities, but is not limited to these. See 7, page 4.

Interpretation plan is a document that provides the policies, strategies and detailed advice for interpreting a heritage item. It is based on research and analysis and plans to communicate the significance of the item, both during a conservation project and in the ongoing life of the item. The plan identifies key themes, storylines and audiences and provides recommendations about interpretation media. It includes practical and specific advice about how to implement the plan.

Interpretation policy consists of clauses and guidelines that provide an intellectual and conceptual framework for communicating the significance of an item. Policies may deal with fabric, setting, history, archaeology audiences and other people, contents, related places and objects, disturbance of fabric, research, records.

Meanings denote what an item signifies, indicates, evokes or expresses.

Media means the tools, techniques and technologies used to convey the interpretation. These can include signs, orientation, notices, guided and self guided walks, audio guides, installations, displays, models, dioramas, exhibitions, lighting, street naming,

holograms, films, video, soundscapes, oral history, maps, brochures, books and catalogues, public art, writers and artists in residence programs, events, activities, role play, demonstrations, educational programs, websites, CD ROM programs, reconstructions, sets, and replicas and other means of communication.

Traditional owner means an Aboriginal person directly descendant from the original inhabitants of an area who has cultural association with the area deriving from traditions, observances, customs, beliefs or history of the original Aboriginal inhabitants of the area. Authorisation to obtain or document information about Aboriginal heritage may be obtained from an Aboriginal person or people who have traditional association to country; these may include traditional owners.

INGREDIENTS FOR BEST PRACTICE IN HERITAGE INTERPRETATION

Best practice in the interpretation of all types of heritage (Aboriginal, built, movable and natural) will include each of the following ingredients.

(1) PEOPLE AND CULTURE

Respect for the special connections between people and items

People and their stories are the vital elements in heritage interpretation, which is in essence the sharing of culture. Interpretation is only undertaken within the cultural traditions of which it is part, and respecting the culture of the audience. The need for this approach is easy to recognise and appreciate in relation to Aboriginal heritage, but it also applies to non-Aboriginal heritage.

Aboriginal culture and heritage is a central element in Aboriginal identity, history, spirituality and customary law. For Aboriginal cultural heritage, interpretation is undertaken to share information among family, kin and other Aboriginal people and with non-Aboriginal people. It is only undertaken with the approval and direct involvement of a traditional owner or an Aboriginal person/s with cultural association. Community protocols apply as to who may have access to places and knowledge, in accordance with traditional laws and customs.

Aboriginal people's culture and heritage may not always be confined to traditional country. Many Aboriginal people may also have connections through relocation and removal from traditional country. Aboriginal people have the primary role in interpreting these places, and non-Aboriginal people can assist. Aboriginal people may also have links with the same range of items as other people.

For non-Aboriginal people, the conventions about cultural ownership of heritage, and the related responsibilities, are not clearly defined. Heritage professionals should not assume that they have either the right to obtain and document information about items of Aboriginal heritage value or the skills required to interpret them.

Over the past decade, interpreters and other heritage practitioners have, through working with communities, developed a better appreciation of the connections between people and heritage. New conventions are evolving about participation in interpretation by people for whom an item has special meanings. Protocols have developed about oral

history, the use of photographs and objects, and some intellectual property, and these may also be relevant to other material knowledge and its use in interpretation.

The links between people and natural and cultural heritage are often expressed through other cultural traditions –such as art, literature, music, food and other creative works and traditions. These works are traditional forms of interpretation.

A collaborative approach is appropriate, with heritage interpreters providing opportunities for people to participate. **The first step is to identify all the people who should be involved.** This may have been done in a conservation management plan, but if not, it should be included in interpretation planning.

Local communities have a proprietary/custodial interest in their heritage and may be able to collaborate in interpretation.

Some heritage items are associated with more than one cultural group, and may have a variety of meanings, some of which may appear to be conflicting. It is then desirable to interpret a variety of meanings rather than present the values of one group and exclude others.

Professionals involved with interpretation are now approaching their role as one of facilitating the community interpretation of heritage.

(2) SIGNIFICANCE

Understand the item and convey its significance

Heritage interpretation should communicate the significance of the place or item. It should answer the question: “why and for whom is this item important?”. Understanding the importance of an item, and the associated information, is essential for heritage interpretation. Heritage registers and reports (such as conservation management plans or plans of management) are key references for information about the significance of an item. For Aboriginal heritage, traditional owners or Aboriginal people who have traditional association to the country in question are the primary source.

The significance of a heritage item may change over time, as new information is discovered.

Interpretation may require further research, such as contextual history, oral history and images. This research may also prompt new understandings of an item’s significance.

Understanding the characteristics of the place or object, people’s memories and stories about it, its condition, how its fabric and use relate to its significance, its suitability for access, and the facilities available for visitors are all important elements in planning for interpretation.

(3) RECORDS AND RESEARCH

Good research is at the heart of effective interpretation.

Use existing records of the item, research additional information, and make the records and research publicly available (subject to security and cultural protocols)

Interpretation should be based on the most accurate historical research and analysis available and on their faithful representation in all interpretive media and programs. This basis should be clearly documented in interpretation planning.

Records and research are essential for interpretation. In many cases further research may be required to identify and document people's stories, images, objects and ideas, all of which inform the interpretation. A comprehensive research report including extended excerpts from primary sources, images, maps, copies of documents and detailed bibliography will assist the ongoing interpretation of a place or object.

This research resource should be kept in a form that can be added to over time as new information comes to light.

In planning interpretation, provide for the safekeeping of, and future access to, the research, maps, images and conservation reports, by depositing the material in libraries or archives.

Access to certain information may be restricted for cultural or legal reasons, or for the security of the item itself. For example, knowledge and understandings about Aboriginal heritage may be restricted to protect significance. For some heritage items, information about ownership, or other details, should only be included in reports or public documents with the consent and acknowledgement of owners, traditional owners or cultural custodians.

(4) AUDIENCE

Explore, respect and respond to the identified audience

Audience research and feedback are essential for relevant and effective interpretation. This involves identifying the expectations, preconceptions, physical requirements, cultural, demographic and behavioural characteristics of the audience, planning to meet their needs, and respecting their cultural values. The audience may include users of the item, workers, regular visitors, passers by and those who visit the place because of its heritage values. Another audience can be those at a distance from the item. Evaluating the audience response to interpretation, and the interpretation's effectiveness, is an essential part of the management of a heritage item that is permanently or regularly open to visitors.

(5) THEMES

Make reasoned choices about themes, ideas and stories

The significance of many places is multi-faceted, and it is often impracticable to communicate every facet. To identify themes and stories for interpretation, and strategies for communicating them, research needs to include the characteristics of the item, existing interpretation media, the audience, the potential media, and serendipitous opportunities for enhancing understanding. Not all themes and stories are necessarily appropriate or relevant to the identified audience, and reasoned choices need to be made explicit following investigation and consultation.

Storytelling is an important dimension of interpretation. Conveying a lot of information and facts about a place is not the purpose of interpretation.

The themes and stories that relate the fabric/physical characteristics of the item to the audience's experience, and that link cultural with natural values are often appropriate. For heritage places with complex stories and values, the interpretation may be implemented over some years, with a staged program of events, displays and activities exploring different aspects of the significance of the place. Over time, opportunities to explore and develop further stories or aspects of significance may arise, for example, by linking with current issues and events. Long term planning and budgeting to take advantage of such opportunities is a necessary part of conservation management.

(6) ENGAGING THE AUDIENCE

Stimulate thought and dialogue, provoke response and enhance understanding

Interpretation reveals meanings and encourages audience response using imagination, creativity, ideas and stories. Interpreters look for hooks or angles that will help visitors relate to the place. Interpretation creates a bridge between the place and the audience.

Providing an enjoyable and stimulating experience is one of the objectives of heritage interpretation.

Communicating significance is not limited to providing information; it also involves enabling the audience to appreciate the related circumstances and values that have made the item the way it is. Interpretation engages the senses, the imagination and the emotions.

(7) CONTEXT

Research and understand the physical, historical, spiritual and contemporary context of the item and related items; and respect local amenity and culture

Context is often an important aspect of significance. This may have changed over time, and explanation of an earlier context – physical, historical, or spiritual – may be needed to explain a present situation.

Relationships between places or objects may not be immediately obvious and require research and interpretation. A heritage place may have important associations and links with other places beyond the boundaries of site ownership. These connections to related places and activities may be an important aspect of its significance.

Understanding these links and connections can enrich the experience of a place and encourage further exploration of the district.

Interpretation policies and programs may need to consider interpreting spatial and functional relationships, and links with related places outside the immediate boundaries of the site. Local amenity and character should not be compromised or obscured by interpretation media or associated new works. The presentation of a place, and any accompanying facilities and their use, should not overwhelm or displace local culture.

(8) SUSTAINING SIGNIFICANCE

Develop interpretation that strengthens and sustains the significance of the item, its character and authenticity

Interpretation should transmit meanings without compromising heritage values. Interpretive media or infrastructure should not interfere with or change the item or its context, or put it at risk. When new structures or works are introduced they should be reversible without damage or risk to significant fabric. Access to part or whole of a place may need to be limited because of fragility or security, or its meaning to its cultural custodians. Good interpretation also contributes to conservation by encouraging appropriate visitor behaviour.

(9) CONSERVATION PLANNING

Integrate interpretation in conservation planning, and in all subsequent stages of a conservation project

Planning for interpretation should start at the beginning of a conservation project and then be integrated into each stage: in investigations leading to the preparation of a conservation management plan, and before, during and after completion of works. Policies for interpretation should be included in the conservation management plan (or plan of management), integrated with other policies e.g. about the care of the item itself, its use, access to it, and research about it. (See NSW Heritage Office, *Conservation Management Documents*.)

(10) MAINTENANCE, EVALUATION AND REVIEW

Include interpretation in the ongoing management of an item; provide for regular maintenance, evaluation and review

Interpretation planning includes consideration of the management of the place and its interpretation. Identify who will implement the plan and manage the interpretation.

Maintenance, refurbishment and review of interpretation media and programs are part of ongoing heritage management and should be provided for in recurrent budgets.

Maintenance includes such actions as the repair or replacement of weathered or damaged signs, renewing dilapidated displays or reprinting brochures.

Review involves the assessment of the interpretive media and content using visitor and peer group feedback and any new research and understandings. It may involve changes to the type of media, its content or the preparation of new media. A review may involve the revision of the interpretation plan, or the preparation of a new plan, especially for items where visitor access is a major use.

A formal, documented review of the interpretation plan, its programs and media should be undertaken at regular intervals. The interpretation plan may be reviewed in conjunction with the review of the item's conservation management plan. This will ensure that any new information about the significance of the item is reflected in a revised interpretation.

Interpretation programs at complex sites may be implemented in stages over a number of years and include events, activities and short term or temporary displays, and the commemoration of any associations between people and the object or place.

(11) SKILLS & KNOWLEDGE

Involve people with relevant skills, knowledge and experience

People knowledgeable about the item, or with expertise and experience in interpretation, historic research and analysis, or skills in the preparation of conservation management plans, should be involved in planning for, or participating in, interpretation. This includes people associated with the place. Historians and archaeologists who have been involved in documenting the item should be consulted where possible. As interpretation is now a requirement of heritage management, inclusion of experienced interpretation practitioners, from the beginning, will help to ensure that the ingredients of best practice interpretation are embedded in the project, and its ongoing management. A multi disciplinary team provides opportunities for mutual learning and skill sharing.

(12) COLLABORATION

Collaborate with organisations and the local community

Community, professional and government organisations have skills, resources, insights and interests which can make a valuable contribution to interpretation. Collaborations provide opportunities to link lines of research, and to develop partnerships and joint projects. Collaborations can develop their own synergy, leading to further opportunities for heritage interpretation or related action.

STRATEGIES FOR PROMOTING INTERPRETATION

The NSW Heritage Office/Heritage Council adopts these strategies for heritage interpretation and recommends their adoption and use by other organisations – state, local, business, professional and community

Strategy 1 Undertake and support heritage interpretation

- » Provide interpretation for items for which they are owners or custodians
- » Adopt and implement NSW Heritage Office Guidelines about interpretation
- » Provide funding and grant programs to encourage interpretation and community interest in heritage

Strategy 2 Encourage integration of heritage interpretation in environmental management, in community and cultural development and the arts, museums and tourism

- » Include heritage interpretation policies and proposals in cultural plans and other relevant planning documents prepared by local governments and other organisations

- » Include the preparation and implementation of heritage interpretation plans as indicators in local government State of Environment Reports
- » Include reporting on heritage interpretation and heritage interpretation plans in State of the Environment reporting by State and Commonwealth governments
- » Include heritage interpretation in community development projects.

Strategy 3 Apply the ingredients for best practice interpretation

- » Promote the application and use of the best practice ingredients in the management of all heritage items.

Strategy 4 Encourage programs that link the interpretation of items to their historical and social contexts

- » Develop and undertake programs that link interpretation between places and objects, and combine natural and cultural values, e.g. through thematic studies and exhibitions and within regions
- » Develop and undertake programs that integrate heritage interpretation within regions and link with other community activities in culture and the arts
- » Encourage museums to interpret heritage places and themes.

Strategy 5 Recognise the importance of records and research

- » Encourage the lodgment of research about heritage places, conservation reports and records and interpretation plans based on these resources in publicly accessible but secure collections, such as local studies libraries.

Strategy 6 Improve standards and skills in interpretation

- » Integrate interpretation into conservation planning, implementation, and item management
- » Facilitate training for staff and community to develop skills in commissioning, assessing and implementing interpretation plans and projects.

Strategy 7 Work collaboratively

- » Collaborate with other people and organisations. Share information, skills and other resources through partnerships
- » Encourage joint ventures in interpretation among museums, heritage organizations, and communities
- » Coordinate and link the interpretation of heritage assets across the state through regional and/or state-wide strategies
- » Encourage councils to prepare heritage interpretation strategies for their whole local government area.