

Australian Archaeology



Archived at Flinders University: dspace.flinders.edu.au

Full Citation Details:

Sullivan, S 1975. The State, People and Archaeologists. 'Australian Archaeology', no.2, 23-31.

ment through which we communicate the ideas and aims of the research. Put another way, there is more to a successful healing than removing the stone from the patient's body, as any nguloongurra or 'clever' man will tell you. The secret is to get the timing right and trust in God to do the rest. The time is certainly right - it's up to us to do the rest.

Howard Creamer
N.S.W. National Parks &
Wildlife Service

THE STATE, PEOPLE AND ARCHAEOLOGISTS

Though I was asked for this contribution because I am a "state" or "public" archaeologist, I have no mandate to speak for any other such archaeologists in Australia, nor do I intend to discuss the interpretation or administration of the various acts which throughout most of Australia limit and control the activities of professional archaeologists. I suspect that it is not the actual details of legislation, but the principles of its interpretation which is of most interest and relevance to the first symposium of the AAA.

I therefore want to talk about some of the potential problems which could arise or have arisen between state archaeologists, other archaeologists, and Aborigines, using as a basis the experience of New South Wales over the past five years.

These can be summed up as:-

1. The potentially conflicting demands of conservation and research;
2. The apparently conflicting interests of archaeologists and the Aboriginal community, which the state is perforce involved in arbitrating.

As this paper is focussed on the role and situation of state archaeologists (i.e. persons employed by government authorities to administer legislation regarding archaeological sites and material) I shall simply refer throughout it to other professional archaeologists as "non-state archaeologists" in order to avoid the over-subtle distinctions between people working in Universities, Museums, on research grants, etc.

Research and Conservation

Legislation for the protection of sites in New South Wales is the result of long term agitation by archaeologists and conservation groups, coupled with a growing demand from the wider public for such protection. The demands of reputable archaeologists were an important factor, but it was eventually an awareness of growing public interest and support which prompted the then Minister for Lands, Tom Lewis, to set up a committee to frame the present legislation (1967). By 1970, when the legislation was gazetted, such legislation had become an acceptable social goal, which it had not been in the 1940's, when the matter was first strongly canvassed by concerned archaeologists.

The form of the legislation and its administration by the National Parks and Wildlife Service, reflects the fact that it was primarily designed to protect relics for the use and enjoyment of the people of New South Wales; therefore preserving sites for research by archaeologists is only one of a number of state aims. On the other hand, the Aboriginal sites of New South Wales cannot be fully used and enjoyed without extensive research into their origin and significance. Research by non-state archaeologists therefore complements protective legislation.

The state's long term aim is to permanently reserve and protect a representative sample of prehistoric sites, and as many sites as possible of significance to Aborigines. Some of these sites will be of great scientific importance to archaeologists. Others will be sites whose potential scientific importance can only be guessed (hence the attempt to acquire a representative sample). Still others will be reserved because a section of society clearly wishes it, though their scientific importance is doubtful. For instance, Mootwingee Historic Site was created because the general public clearly appreciates Mootwingee; to it the site is not so much scientifically significant, as aesthetically appealing and romantic, because of the particular combination of art sites and terrain. Another example is the carved trees of the central west, which are of small interest to non-state archaeologists, but a source of growing pride and interest to local communities, and consequently protected by the Service. Finally there are sites of significance to local Aboriginal communities, which have a high priority with the Service, regardless of their research potential.

The Service is not, of course, only guided by public taste, and research (often carried out by non-state archaeologists) is the basis for its priority system. However, these examples indicate that non-state and state archaeologists have slightly different aims: the former to gain knowledge from archaeological sites; the latter to conserve Aboriginal sites for society.

Co-operation between the two groups is essential for the efficiency of both. To date such co-operation has been less than maximum. State archaeologists have complained of lack of sympathy,

support and assistance; non-state archaeologists feel restricted and unnecessarily confined by the legislation which they themselves helped to create. The crux of this latter complaint is the permit system for excavation of sites.

Permits

It is illegal for the general public to destroy or interfere with sites. Archaeologists have been given a special exemption from this rule, so that research can be carried out. In this sense, a permit is not a restriction, but a special privilege given to a particular class of people, not for their own benefit (though they do benefit from it) but for the good of society.

This admitted, it still seems to some that accredited archaeologists should be given *carte blanche*, i.e. a general permit. State authorities are reluctant to do this, and with good reason. The basic concern of the state is to protect sites. Perfectly competent archaeologists do make mistakes and miscalculations. Therefore in any particular case, the state must consider not simply whether an archaeologist is competent in his/her discipline, but whether the particular project proposed is necessary and not unduly harmful to the site. By virtue of their state-wide field of responsibility, and because they are positioned within government institutions which have access to a variety of environmental expertise, state archaeologists are in a position to take a broad view of Aboriginal sites and their problems, and hopefully they do so. They are in a position to see possible consequences of an action, which may not be immediately apparent to non-state archaeologists. For instance, a site may be subject to erosion and require special restorative measures; or it may be in an area where any excavation would result in an undue and dangerous public interest. The state may even have the temerity to suggest alternate sites which may be equally acceptable, or extra work or expertise which would broaden the project to everyone's advantage. It will also hold records about past and current work of archaeologists in the same field or area, the co-ordination of which will prevent such things as the excavation of one site by several researchers.

Archaeologists contribute to the good name of archaeology by jumping through the hoop of a permit application. The Service receives a fairly steady stream of formal and informal complaints about its permittees' archaeological activities, from the excavators' students, from amateurs, conservationists, Aborigines and its own and other government departments. More than 99% of these complaints are groundless. Because of its present permit system, the Service is able to demonstrate this fact.

The giving of carefully considered permits, and the laying down of minimal conditions enables the Service to indicate to all the standards required of a scientific discipline. Most amateurs now realise that not everyone can dig; their exploration of the permit system has convinced them that there is more to proper excavation than a pick and shovel.

Another irritant to non-state archaeologists is that the state appears to be policing only law abiding professionals, who fill in their forms. Yes, at present they are; but the state systems are in their infancy. As expertise and personnel increase, so will the state's ability to prevent unauthorised excavations.

Archaeologists then, should grin and bear the permit system. But there are a few things which the state can do to make the process more bearable.

1. State authorities and state archaeologists should adopt a positive and helpful attitude, and make every effort to deal with permit applications with dispatch and efficiency.
2. Except in special circumstances, state authorities should not attempt to lay down detailed rules and methodology for the conduct of excavations.
3. State archaeologists would be unwise to act as the sole adviser on the granting of permits by the state. Recommendations should be made by an impartial committee or group with professional expertise and representation of several points of view.
4. It is also unwise for the state archaeologists to excavate extensively for private research within his/her own state. Such activity need not be unethical; but it may be unwise, especially if the state archaeologist does not require a permit to excavate (this is so in New South Wales) and is at the same time obliged to refuse other permit applications. Justified or not, invidious comparisons will be made, especially as the state archaeologist has access to information (excavation reports, site records, etc) not readily available to others.

The National Parks and Wildlife Service has given more permits than any other state. It has granted about sixty permits, has refused one to a professional (on the grounds that sufficient work of the same type had been done on the site). It has added special conditions to some permits, aimed mainly at protection of the site.

Co-operation

In Australia in recent years the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies has been a major source of funding for archaeological research projects, and it has been generous. In America, archaeologists often have to combine their research interests with survey/salvage work in threatened areas, because funding is available only for work in these areas.

Co-operation by coercion in this way is not desirable. However, the relative independence of Australian non-state archaeologists has meant a general lack of co-operation between them and the state. The state has been concerned with conservation of sites, which means in practical terms, survey, assessment, and if necessary, salvage. The non-state archaeologist has largely been concerned with independent research, regardless of the needs of the state. There have been isolated examples of exemplary co-operation; but more frequently, non-state archaeologists do not even notify the Service about sites they have located (which they are bound by law to do) let alone provide more active co-operation.

This has meant that state archaeologists do almost nothing but survey work, and little of the in-depth research often necessary to enable the right decisions to be made; moreover, survey/salvage work, tends to become boring and professionally debilitating. At the same time, non-state archaeologists are often doing research work which if slightly restructured would be of considerable value to the state archaeologist.

As Jim O'Connell pointed out at the recent symposium, survey/salvage work must be problem orientated to provide challenge and scientific interest for serious research workers. Ideally, researchers should be able to use many crisis situations to gain some new insight or solve a problem in the general field. Therefore, if the state wants co-operation from non-state workers, it must present academically worthwhile projects and must be prepared for the work to extend beyond the boundaries of the immediate crisis situation. Conversely, non-state archaeologists must be prepared to concede that crisis situations can be used in this way even if it requires a broader approach than they might usually adopt.

Non-state archaeologists could try harder to find, within their own research aims, opportunities of assisting in what are more or less crisis archaeological situations. Here are a few ideas for consideration. Prehistory students, in the past, have not been well trained in the practicalities of "bread and butter" archaeology. If they have been digging at say, Kow Swamp, they know a lot about a particular site. They rarely know much about many other types of sites, or about the use of air photos, or map reading, photography, rock art recording, etc. Hopefully this is changing. The Service can assist in this practical training, by using students extensively for its survey/salvage work, and providing finance for their employment, or at least upkeep, during this period. By making such practical work a necessary requirement for undergraduates, Universities will assist both the Service and the students, many of whom will be entering areas of work where such training is essential.

Taking this idea further, regional non-state archaeologists can very readily combine their research interests in a particular area with a general survey, and overview of crisis situations. This is already happening, and could be encouraged, in practical terms, by an agreement between the state and the University concerned,

whereby the state pays part of the salary of such an archaeologist, on condition that part of his/her time is spent in local survey/salvage work.

Obviously there is no better person to conduct survey/salvage work than an archaeologist deeply involved in research in a particular region; such a person should be very capable of the efficient survey and accurate assessment of individual or groups of local sites. For this reason, archaeologists should also be ready to offer themselves as consultants to companies and state authorities who require regional archaeological Environmental Impact Statements. Such archaeologists may not necessarily do all the work themselves; but their advice, and, if necessary, their support for the necessity of such a survey, would considerably assist the state in encouraging such surveys.

The State, Archaeologists and Aborigines

The New South Wales legislation, gazetted in April 1970, made no mention of the Aboriginal people in New South Wales. The state seemed to be oblivious to any connection between Aborigines and Aboriginal sites. This was despite the involvement of archaeologists and anthropologists in the forming of the Act, which fact indicates, not negligence, but a genuine lack of awareness.

Everyone is now very much aware of the connection. Growing Aboriginal self awareness and involvement has been largely responsible for this. In response to this change, almost all states have modified their outlook on Aboriginal relics. The new act in New South Wales now acknowledges the legitimate interest of Aborigines in some sites. It must be said however, that the legislative changes are not fundamental and that the government has, for instance, rejected the idea of statutory Aboriginal representation on the Aboriginal Relics Advisory Committee.

A more significant factor in New South Wales has been the change in attitude to Aboriginal participation. This is shown in such things as the newly designed excavation permit forms, which require consultation with Aborigines, an agreement that Aborigines should be employed in certain cases to protect their own sites, and the commencement of a survey to locate and record sites of significance to Aborigines in New South Wales. This survey has shown firstly that there are a large number of sites of traditional significance to Aborigines in New South Wales, and secondly, that all Aboriginal sites have an increasing significance to the general Aboriginal community. Aborigines are now vigorously demanding that the Service protect, and in some cases give Aborigines custody of, individual sites which are truly prehistoric in the sense of having no known traditional connection with a particular group. In other words, it often seems that in New South Wales the distinction between sites which were indubitably significant according to traditional cultural values and sites which archaeologists would regard as technically prehistoric, is becoming a purely white (European) distinction.

Anyone who wishes to understand and rectify the present tensions between archaeologists and Aborigines, must accept the present Aboriginal outlook as a real and legitimate view.

The state is responding to this increasing Aboriginal consciousness by reserving sites of importance to Aborigines, and by training Aborigines to protect their sites, in a European way, which is intended to complement traditional protection. Aborigines who wish to preserve their own cultural heritage require expertise in two cultures. Archaeologists, however, have shown little interest in reciprocating this, presumably because they have been genuinely unaware of Aboriginal interest and emotional involvement in prehistoric sites until recently. It is not surprising that this ignorance was virtually universal, considering that visible Aboriginal involvement and activism is a recent phenomenon. There is no point apportioning blame on this score. But as a result, the archaeological community has not developed any unified stance or policy which might enable it to communicate effectively with Aborigines.

In brief, there are two groups - professional archaeologists and Aborigines, who have basically different views about the excavation of Aboriginal sites, especially Aboriginal skeletal material. The immediate problem is that each group seems generally ignorant of the other's position. Both have relied largely on the media for their information and for the dissemination of their objections and rebuttals. The conflict, in this sense, has been truly a paper war. There has been some communication through solicitors, but this has not been very enlightening either. At present, neither side has clear view of the real picture.

For instance, Aborigines seem to believe that the main aim of archaeological work at Lake Mungo is the excavation of skeletal material in large quantities. In fact very few skeletons have been located at Mungo and none were discovered by excavation. The archaeologists involved are more interested in exploring a total way of life which goes back 40,000 years - work of considerable benefit to the Aboriginal movement. But because the media has stressed the spectacular aspects of excavation, at Lake Mungo and elsewhere, many Aborigines now genuinely believe that excavation usually means digging up skeletons (as do many uninformed Europeans).

Archaeologists probably have similar misconceptions about Aboriginal views. It is difficult for me to say what these misconceptions are, since I myself do not know the real Aboriginal position. A clear example, however, is the common assertion that urban Aborigines are the only objectors to archaeological programmes, and that rural Aborigines are totally uninterested. I know this to be untrue, but it is an understandable belief if based on media information.

Mungo is of course the most lurid example of this communication problem. The site is significant both to archaeologists and to Aborigines. Neither can see valid reasons why the other should be

concerned with it. (At this stage, any archaeologist who claims to "understand" the Aboriginal point of view is probably deluding him or herself.) It is hardly an exaggeration to say the Lake Mungo has become a sacred site in two cultures: sacred to archaeologists who have a cultural belief in the importance of knowledge; sacred to Aborigines who believe that the strange rituals which archaeologists perform at the site constitute desecration.

Aborigines are all the more bitter and outraged because they are truly powerless, within the law, to prevent this situation, regardless of the rights and wrongs of any particular case (and I am well aware that these can be argued endlessly). Dialogue, such as at this symposium, is then the immediate and essential starting point, but it is not a question of one very well intentioned Friday afternoon. It must be real and continuous.

The Service is the meat in the sandwich in New South Wales, since it actually gives and refuses the permits. For this reason considerable discussion within and without the Aboriginal Relics Advisory Committee has resulted in the emergence of some basic points and some possible solutions.

These random thoughts are submitted as a basis for further discussions.

1. Real dialogue can only take place over considerable time and space. It is pleasing to note the increasing contributions by archaeologists to such publications as *New Dawn*, *Identity*, *Aboriginal News*, etc. Such articles should actually solicit opinion and comment from Aborigines, although even this is a very European method of contact. Real grassroots contact is necessary to discover Aboriginal feelings and fears regarding particular situations. The Service's new permit form will require that local Aborigines be consulted prior to excavation in their area; further it will suggest that local Aborigines should be involved in excavations, at least at the extent of being taken to the site, if they wish it. After all, Aborigines are the *previous* landowners, if not the present.

2. Most complaints arise about the excavation of skeletal material. The Service now has an *ad hoc* policy of discouraging excavation of skeletons *per se*, and encouraging the return of accidentally discovered recent skeletal material to local Aborigines when they request it. However, we have no idea whether this is a "good thing", nor what the interests of non-state archaeologists are in this situation. For example -

Which types of burials are scientifically important? Do archaeologists wish to study every burial discovered? Is it possible to make casts of bones and return them? How much material is there already in museums and how much more is required? Presently the material disappears into the capacious (?) maw of the Australian Museum and is never looked at again. Recently, a south coast

Aborigine asked if the scientists had finished with some burial material from the south coast which was collected six years ago. He thought they had had enough time to look at it and wished it to be reburied. At present the museum staff lacks facilities and time for this type of work.

All this implies that more research rather than less is required, especially into current collections, to determine some of the scientific requirements for the future. This is an important research aim and requires funding on a large scale. It has the further advantage of not involving disturbance of *in situ* burials (which is causing most of the trouble) and may obviate some of the need for such disturbance in the future. Archaeologists will then be able to clearly tell the Aborigines (and the state) which skeletal material they want and why. Scientific needs are not the only ones to be considered in the present situation, but a clear statement of them would certainly provide a better basis for discussion.

3. It is not inconceivable that Aborigines would agree to a scheme whereby they were closely involved with museums in the guardianship of Aboriginal material, and were given real power with reference to access to such material. At present, and with good reason, they feel powerless and alienated.

4. Finally, serious consideration should be given (by the Service at least) to a moratorium on certain types of excavation while this dialogue is going on. In fact the Service has very few specific applications for the excavation of skeletal material, and all such applications are for emergency situations. An actual moratorium (imposed by the AAA for example) therefore seems unlikely to be traumatic for archaeologists; but it may assist in convincing Aborigines of the reality of archaeologists' attempts to communicate, especially if publicised - using the media again, but in this case, usefully.

All the above are strategies for avoiding conflict; none of them precludes occasional failure, nor the real possibility that archaeologists will themselves have to compromise. Archaeologists must accept that this is not just a question of reasoning Aborigines out of irrational fears and beliefs - they must really realise that there may be occasions and circumstances when the Aboriginal view will prevail.

Sharon Sullivan,
National Parks and Wildlife
Service of New South Wales