

THE PARLIAMENT OF THE COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

Preservation of the Quinkan Galleries, Cape York Peninsula

Report from the House of Representatives Standing Committee on
Environment and Conservation

March 1979

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House of Representatives Standing Committee on Environment and Conservation

TERMS OF REFERENCE

That a Standing Committee be appointed to inquire into and report on:

- (a) environmental aspects of legislative and administrative measures which ought to be taken in order to ensure the wise and effective management of the Australian environment and of Australia's natural resources, and
- (b) such other matters relating to the environment and conservation and the management of Australia's natural resources as are referred to it by:
 - (i) the Minister responsible for those matters, or
 - (ii) resolution of the House.

MEMBERS OF THE COMMITTEE

<i>Chairman</i>	Mr J. C. Hodges, M.P.
<i>Deputy-Chairman</i>	Dr H. A. Jenkins, M.P.
<i>Members</i>	Mr M. Baillieu, M.P.
	Mr B. Cohen, M.P.
	Mr J. F. Cotter, M.P.
	Mr P. S. Fisher, M.P.
	Mr B. L. Howe, M.P.
	Mr B. D. Simon, M.P.
<i>Clerk to the Committee</i>	Mr J. R. Cummins

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Recommendations

The Committee recommends that:

1. the Australian National Parks and Wildlife Service in consultation with the Queensland Government offer assistance to the Quinkan Reserves Trust in the development of a comprehensive plan of management for the Quinkan Reserve;
(paragraph 33)
2. no Commonwealth funds be provided for the Quinkan Reserve for other than essential interim works until a comprehensive plan of management has been developed;
(paragraph 35)
3. the Minister for Aboriginal Affairs request the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies to undertake a study to locate the traditional owners of the Laura rock art.
(paragraph 36)

1 Introduction

On 21 September 1978 the Committee resolved to inquire into and report on: the preservation of the Quinkan Galleries in Cape York Peninsula.

2. The Committee decided on this reference following an inspection of Aboriginal cave paintings near Laura in north-east Queensland. Members were impressed with the paintings and were concerned that an area of such national importance be properly preserved.

3. A public hearing was held in Canberra on 7 November 1978 when evidence was taken from the Aborigines Historic Places Trust, the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies and the Australian Heritage Commission. In addition, written advice was received from the Queensland Government and the Australian National Parks and Wildlife Service. A list of witnesses appearing before the Committee is at Appendix 1. Evidence given at the public hearing is available for inspection in Hansard form at the National Library and the Committee Office of the House of Representatives.

2 The Quinkan Galleries

DESCRIPTION

4. The first major discovery of Aboriginal rock art in Cape York was in 1960 when road builders discovered a group of galleries about 12 km south-east of Laura. Since that time several hundred galleries have been discovered in the Laura region. These galleries contain one of the largest bodies of Aboriginal art in Australia.

5. The art is distinctive with many large polychrome works of art of great aesthetic significance. The subjects and styles of the paintings are diverse and include ancestral culture heroes, totem ancestors, spirit figures, sorcerers, love magic, hunting magic, burials, weapons and implements. Styles of art include abstract designs, stencils, linear outline, silhouette drawings, and large and small bichrome and polychrome human and animal figures.

SIGNIFICANCE

6. The Australian Heritage Commission described the Quinkan Galleries as one of the largest and most exciting bodies of prehistoric art in the world.¹ The Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies has suggested that the paintings are part of the world heritage and as such should be nominated for the World Heritage List. The Australian Heritage Commission agreed that the Quinkan Galleries merit World Heritage nomination.²

7. A preliminary analysis of the many superimposed layers of engravings and paintings has revealed a chronological sequence of art styles which began with engravings perhaps more than 20 000 years ago. The paintings in the Galleries were continually added to until early this century when the top layer of paintings was completed depicting Europeans, their horses and rifles.

8. The oldest securely dated examples of Aboriginal rock art yet found in Australia came from the 'Early Man Shelter' in the Laura region. A frieze of extremely weathered rock engravings dropping below the sand in this shelter was excavated in 1974. The lowest deposit covering the engravings yielded a radio carbon date of 13 000 years. The Australian Heritage Commission explained that the early man site is highly significant in the pre-history of north-east Australia as it is the only site in the Cape York region which has been dated back to the Ice Ages and shows evidence of the evolution of stone implements.³

STATE OF PRESERVATION

9. The paintings are generally well preserved. The Institute commented on the absence of vandalism, which is very unusual for most rock art areas. Since the first major discoveries did not occur until 1960 and because of the general inaccessibility of the area, this is to be expected. Only in one shelter where there is relatively easy tourist access has there been a small amount of vandalism. Some deterioration of this site has resulted from dust blown up as tourists walk along the site.

10. The worst damage to the paintings is due to termites and wasps' nests. Attempts to remove termite runs in the past have led to further deterioration as the termites merely create another run alongside the original. There is some damage from pigs and wallabies rubbing against the paintings.

1. Transcript, p. 48.

2. Transcript, p. 56.

3. Transcript, p. 60.

11. Natural flaking of the rock occurs at some sites. The oldest engravings have been weathered smooth and are often covered with a layer of silica.

MANAGEMENT

12. In July 1977, in accordance with the *Aboriginal Relics Preservation Act 1967*, the Queensland Government gazetted 97 500 hectares of land encompassing most of the presently known Laura sites as a reserve for the preservation and protection of Aboriginal relics. The Queensland Government has appointed the Director of the Department of Aboriginal and Island Affairs and the Chairman of the Cape York Conservation Council as Trustees who will administer the Reserve with the assistance of an advisory panel appointed by the Trustees.

13. The Act vests ownership of the rock art in the Crown and prohibits damaging or defacing the art. A person may not enter the Reserve except with the permission of the Trustees.

14. An Aboriginal ranger has been appointed to assist in management and preservation.

15. At the Commonwealth level, the Quinkan area has been proposed for listing on the Register of the National Estate. Registration protects the site from actions of Commonwealth departments and instrumentalities. Commonwealth Ministers, departments or authorities may not take action that adversely affects a registered place unless satisfied that there is no feasible and prudent alternative. Where there is no such feasible alternative all measures that can reasonably be taken to minimise the adverse effect will be taken. Registration also identifies the area as eligible for funds under the National Estate Grants Program. Under this Program funds can be made available for the physical protection of sites, for example the erection of barricades.

3. Conclusions

IMPACT OF TOURISM

16. Notwithstanding the damage caused by animals and weathering, the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies said that the greatest danger to the rock paintings is the possible harmful influence of tourism.
17. There are no reliable statistics available on how many people visit the Laura sites. The Far North Queensland Development Bureau in its evidence to the House of Representatives Select Committee on Tourism said that tourism in northern Queensland is increasing and lists the Quinkan Galleries as one of the attractions.
18. It is estimated that 1000 people visited the sites in 1971. Since then the existence of the paintings has been publicised. There has also been an improvement in the roads and the use of four-wheel-drive vehicles has become popular. These factors have resulted in a greater number of people viewing the paintings.
19. The Aborigines Historic Places Trust believes that the Galleries will become recognised as the third great natural wonder in Australia after the Great Barrier Reef and Ayers Rock.
20. Parts of the Laura region are very fragile and the Trust explained that some time in the future it will be necessary to decide and limit the number of people per day it can support without environmentally degrading the area. The Committee considers that it is essential to determine the tourist potential now before development takes place so that a proper management plan can be devised.

DEVELOPMENT OF A PLAN OF MANAGEMENT

21. The Aborigines Historic Places Trust told the Committee that the immediate problem in properly protecting the sites is adequate funding. The Trust suggested an annual grant of \$60 000 is required initially to employ four rangers and to purchase vehicles and fencing materials. The Trust stated that by the 1980s tourist activity would make the Reserve self-supporting and no further government financing would be necessary.
22. The Committee sought the views of the Institute and the Australian National Parks and Wildlife Service. The Institute said that to properly protect the sites far more than \$60 000 would be required. They stated that evidence suggests that as the number of visitors increases there is a disproportionate deterioration, and that '\$60 000 is nothing'.⁴
23. The Parks Service also doubted whether funds coming from tourism will ever completely or substantially pay for the development and maintenance of the Galleries. As visitor numbers increase so does the amount of necessary maintenance and infrastructure. The Parks Service commented that the estimated cost of \$60 000 a year appears extremely low.
24. The Committee agrees with the views of the Institute and the Parks Service that it is most unlikely that the Park will ever be self-supporting. A proper management plan for the sites must be developed. The Committee is disturbed that an *ad hoc* approach will lead to serious degradation such as that which has occurred in the Ayers Rock-Mt Olga National Park.
25. The Parks Service provided details of the work currently being undertaken in Kakadu National Park. The experience gained by the Parks Service would be of great assistance to the Quinkan Reserves Trust in developing a comprehensive plan.

4. Transcript, p. 44.

26. The development of a management plan will take considerable time. Tourist pressures already exist and it is necessary for interim measures to be taken to protect the sites until a plan can be implemented. The Committee believes however that under no circumstances should Commonwealth funds be provided for other than necessary interim works until a comprehensive plan of management for the area has been developed.

ABORIGINAL INVOLVEMENT

27. The Committee has stated in earlier reports⁵ that Aboriginals should be given the opportunity to actively participate in the development and management of parks and reserves located in areas where they have traditional attachment or involvement.

28. The Aborigines Historic Places Trust claimed that the Aboriginals of the Laura region have no knowledge of the significance or the traditions of the Quinkan rock art. Mr Trezise of the Trust stated that nearly twenty years ago he had discussions with Aboriginal elders who knew something of the sites but these people have since died. He agrees that local people should be involved in the Reserve. In the Laura School, Aboriginal children are being taught the traditions based on the research he has undertaken. It is proposed to offer them employment as rangers and guides in the Reserve.

29. The Institute argued that the traditional owners may still exist in places other than the Laura area. The Institute believes that Aboriginals at Hopevale Mission may have special knowledge of the rock art of the region. With proper staff and funding, a relatively short research project may discover whether or not traditional owners still exist.

30. As there may still be Aboriginals with special knowledge of the rock art, the Institute questioned the propriety of the Laura children being taught about the sites by other than the traditional owners.

31. The Committee acknowledges the fine work undertaken by Mr Trezise in recording the mythology of the rock art. It considers that it might be possible to obtain a more detailed account if the traditional owners can be located. The Committee considers that unless the necessary research is undertaken quickly some of the traditions and myths of the Laura region may be lost for ever.

32. The Committee believes that no extensive development of the Reserve should be undertaken until this research has been completed. Should it be found that traditional owners no longer exist, the education and participation of the Aboriginals as envisaged by the Aborigines Historic Places Trust should be encouraged.

RECOMMENDATIONS

33. The Committee recognises that the management of parks and reserves in Queensland is the responsibility of the State Government. The Committee believes however that the experience gained by the Australian National Parks and Wildlife Service in the preservation of Aboriginal sites in the Northern Territory would be invaluable in assisting any State Government in the development of plans for sites similar to those located in the Northern Territory. Accordingly, the Committee recommends that:

the Australian National Parks and Wildlife Service in consultation with the Queensland Government offer assistance to the Quinkan Reserves Trust in the development of a comprehensive plan of management for the Quinkan Reserve.

5. House of Representatives Standing Committee on Environment and Conservation, *Ayers Rock-Mount Olga National Park*, Parliamentary Paper No. 215 of 1973, and *The Management of Ayers Rock-Mt Olga National Park*, Parliamentary Paper No. 32 of 1977.

34. Any involvement of the Parks Service in implementing the plan of management should be with the approval of the Queensland Government.

35. The Committee further recommends that:

no Commonwealth funds be provided for the Quinkan Reserve for other than essential interim works until a comprehensive plan of management has been developed.

36. The Report commented earlier that it is important that Aborigines be consulted. As a first step it is essential to determine whether or not the traditional owners are still living. Accordingly, the Committee recommends that:

the Minister for Aboriginal Affairs request the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies to undertake a study to locate the traditional owners of the Laura rock art.

(J. C. HODGES)

Chairman

March 1979

Appendix

LIST OF WITNESSES AND EXHIBITS

Witnesses

BOURKE, Mr M.	Director Australian Heritage Commission
DIX, Mr W. C.	Deputy Principal Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies
FLOOD, Dr J. M.	Archaeologist Australian Heritage Commission
MULVANEY, Professor D. J.	Commissioner Australian Heritage Commission
O'GRADY, Mr W. S.	Trustee Aborigines Historic Places Trust
ROSENFELDT, Dr A.	Member Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies
TREZISE, Mr P. J.	Publicity Officer Aborigines Historic Places Trust
UCKO, Dr P. J.	Principal Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies

Exhibits

- 1 (a) *Gugu-Yalani Galleries, development or destruction.* Australian Council for the Arts, 1972.
- 1 (b) TREZISE, P. J. 'Representations of Crocodiles in Laura Art' in UCKO, P. J. (ed.) *Form in Indigenous Art, Schematisation in the Art of Aboriginal Australia and Prehistoric Europe.* Institute of Aboriginal Studies, Canberra, 1977.

