

Academy of the Social Sciences in Australia Workshops Program Grant

Reframing Practice: Site Recording Methodologies and Ethics in Western Australian Aboriginal Heritage

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Acknowledgement of Country

Country is our mother, our provider and keeper of our cultural belongings.

Culture and Country go together.

You can't have one without the other.

Yamatji Marpa Aboriginal Corporation respectfully acknowledges the
Traditional Owners and custodians throughout Western Australia,
and on whose Country we work.

We acknowledge and respect their deep connection to their lands and waterways.

We honour and pay respect to Elders, and to their ancestors who survived and cared for
Country.

Our offices are located on Whadjuk Country, Southern Yamatji Country,
Kariyarra Country, and Yawuru Country.

We recognise the continuing culture, traditions, stories and living cultures on these lands and
commit to building a brighter future together.

country
culture
people
future

Image warning:

Please be advised, this publication may contain images and names of deceased people. YMAC sincerely apologises for any distress this may cause.



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2 Background

Yamatji Marlpa Aboriginal Corporation (YMAC) is the native title representative body for the Pilbara, Murchison and Gascoyne regions in Western Australia. YMAC anthropologists and archaeologists are heavily involved in applied heritage activities including cultural heritage surveys, native title research, cultural mapping projects for Prescribed Bodies Corporate (PBCs), collaboration with Indigenous ranger groups, traditional ecological knowledge programs, and social impact assessments.

This workshop was an opportunity for YMAC anthropologists and archaeologists to come together in a collaborative professional development workshop to further their understanding on issues arising from their current roles and growing trends in heritage practice in Western Australia.

3 Convenors

The workshop was held Wednesday 11 February 2026 at Yamatji Marlpa Aboriginal Corporation's Perth office by the following co-convenors:

- Dirima Cuthbert, Principal Anthropologist, Dortch and Cuthbert Pty Ltd
- Dr Jo Thomson, Director / Principal - Archaeology and Heritage Management, Big Island Research
- Ken Haywood, Lecturer at Kurongkurl Katitjin, Centre for Indigenous Australian Education and Research, Edith Cowan University.

The convenors were supported by Amy Usher (YMAC Research, Culture and Country Services Manager) and Senior YMAC Heritage Staff Members

4 Overview

Through an interactive format grounded in real-world case studies and co-designed by leading heritage professionals in Western Australia, the workshop fostered critical dialogue around issues the role of social scientists (in particular, anthropologists and archaeologists) in heritage protection. This workshop employed local case studies and personal experiences of the convenors to deepen attendee's understandings of ethical engagement, cultural protocols, methodologies and conceptual frameworks which inform heritage research in their practice. The workshop equipped early- and mid-career researchers with the critical knowledge and reflective skills essential for culturally responsive and effective heritage practice.

5 Workshop Sessions

Noongar elder Ken Haywood began the day with an exercise in introspective thinking on the topic 'know thyself' with specific regards to cultural considerations, responsibilities and obligations in the attendees' roles. This foundation for the day enabled attendees to consider their own selves, biases, values and epistemologies alongside their roles as professionals in the field working with Traditional Owners to record and protect cultural heritage.

This session led on to Archaeologist Dr Jo Thompson presenting on 'Valuing Aboriginal heritage' which focused on values-based heritage management. The group discussed 'heritage' as a complex set of values, with a heritage practice approach that is based on this understanding enabling a multiplicity of views and comprehensive understanding to be recognized. Dr Thompson spoke of the origins and development of the concept of 'significance' as a set of criteria that has become embedded in various heritage and conservations charters around the world. The group looked at various significance assessment frameworks and discussed best practice models as well as varying legislative international, national, and state based criteria. Specifically, the attendees' research as heritage professionals, the group spoke about intangible values and meanings through spiritual connections and values that are embodied in cultural landscapes.

On a practical level, the workshop covered significance assessment processes and how heritage professionals in the field gather evidence, establish cultural context and assess significance, including in the process of presenting statements of significance or other similar documents. The group workshopped several case studies of local sites, critiquing and analysing the writing, and discussing how they would improve or amend such a statement with advice from the convenors. Being a forum of archaeologists and anthropologists, such processes involved several steps of consultation to incorporate the archaeological significance of a site in the context of the broader ethnography of the region.

Importantly, attendees spoke about how a statement of significance can be translated or adapted into the kinds of forms that anthropologists and archaeologists are required to fill out as part of submitting data and information in the Aboriginal Cultural Heritage reporting process through the Department of Planning, Lands and Heritage (WA). They also noted how this could be beneficial to Traditional Owner groups as a plainer language summary, that directly addressed the legal framework of significance when negotiating with proponents regarding heritage protection.

Attendees also spoke about legislation changes in Western Australia, and opportunities for heritage protection beyond the available legislative frameworks. The convenors workshopped several questions and topics submitted by attendees prior to and during the session, including live issues they are facing in the field of heritage management such as:

How are sites or places different? Are they different? Is this terminology only relevant based on antiquated legislation and/or various communities of practice?

How to manage the rock vs hard place of legal requirements under legislation/heritage agreements and the proponent driven model of heritage. How do we imbed best practice and what strategies can we use to bring proponents on board with best practice approaches?

The third session followed with a focus on 'Fieldwork methodologies and ethical practice' by Dirima Cuthbert. The attendees discussed their own 'positioning' within the theme of knowing where they stand as anthropologists and archaeologists working with Traditional Owners and Proponents in heritage field in WA. They also talked more generally about working with Traditional Owners in relation to their country in the related field of Native Title anthropology. Cuthbert spoke about her personal practice and her own journey through

notions of self-positioning through her work with Traditional Owners through her decades as an anthropologist. Cuthbert addressed concepts of the 'Third Cultural Space' and other concepts regarding recognising and understanding one's self-positioning. Significantly, this session enabled attendees to introspectively consider their own positioning in all aspects of their work, and how they need to be conscious of where they want to stand in their own practice, which shapes what they have authority to do and say. Attendees explained that their relationships with Traditional Owners and proponents in fieldwork are constantly being negotiated or challenged. They also discussed their professional and personal obligations to always consider aspects of compliance (for example, with heritage agreements, cultural heritage legislation, cultural protocols) and how this must be balanced with their own self-positioning and values.

The convenors workshopped several questions and topics submitted by attendees, including live issues they are facing in the field of heritage management such as:

Ideas of representativeness when not all perspectives (men's, women's etc.) are considered in a project?

Building relationships and trust and perspectives on when important information to protect a place cannot be shared.

Session Four focused on the topic 'From field consultations to documentation - a case study in cultural landscapes.' The convenors spoke about methodologies for identification of values for features in a landscape and how to understand impacts. They noted that cultural landscapes are not considered a 'site' under the current WA legislation, and the difficulties in working with legislation that does not consider the interconnectedness of places, and the intangible values associated with a cultural landscape.

Attendees used a local case study to discuss methodologies for a cultural heritage landscape study, noting the various capabilities and disciplines in the room led to different approaches and ideas. Ken Haywood shared a short film on families speaking about the embodied spiritual connections they hold with a particular site and discussed such significant and intangible embodied relationships with Country.

As a final session, the convenors workshopped further questions and topics submitted by attendees, including live issues they are facing in the field of heritage management such as:

How do anthropologists map intangible places with rigour and precision in ways that defend against challenges of perceived subjectivities of the discipline and the weaknesses of the legislation.

How can archaeologists better map/record intangible aspects of sites/places in situations where an anthropologist may not be present?

How do we protect cultural landscapes in light of development pressures to cut up and isolate, landscapes and ethnographic features. Note here the limits of legislation.

6 Workshop Format

The convenors gave extensively researched presentations to attendees, with visual aids and media to assist throughout. An open group discussion-based format allowed attendees to participate, respond to and ask questions throughout and share their own experiences. There were also designated sessions for small group workshops enabling interdisciplinary teams, and groups of differing experience levels, to discuss specific ideas or case studies.

7 Outcomes

YMAC conducted a post workshop survey with overwhelmingly positive responses from attendees, who particularly noted the interactive nature clear presentations, and in-depth discussions were highly relevant to their current roles and built their confidence in the topics discussed. The feedback process has highlighted several key areas and topics arising from this workshop for YMAC to incorporate in future training both internally, and externally to Traditional Owner groups.

The convenors provided their informative presentations for YMAC to utilise in a training package for new staff, including case studies and methodological approaches for the themes discussed. Additionally, staff have begun to implement some of the workshop training into their everyday practice - including writing statements of significance to include in heritage and site visit reports. YMAC also produced a news article covering the session (print and online) to be distributed to YMAC members and online on its website.

8 Workshop Photos



Photo 1 Breakout Session



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ABORIGINAL CORPORATION



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