

GARA VALLEY ENVIRONMENT PRESERVATION ASSOCIATION INC.

World Heritage Properties: Our Duty of Care

The UNESCO World Heritage Convention was inaugurated on 16 November, 1972 and Australia became a signatory on 22 August, 1974. In November, 2007 there were 185 signatories world-wide to the World Heritage Convention.

As responsible ‘citizens of the world’, to borrow from the SBS news banner, *Australians have the obligation and responsibility to protect their UNESCO World Heritage Properties. We have an obligation to NOT willfully condemn any of them to a future of on-going degradation.*

What is ‘World Heritage’?

The UNESCO World Heritage Convention rationale states that all listed sites are **places of “outstanding universal value”** because

- they are part of a heritage of all humankind
- their protection is our shared responsibility
- they are held in trust for this and future generations

The following extract (<http://whc.unesco.org/en/about/>) from the official website clearly summarises this position:

Heritage is our legacy from the past, what we live with today, and what we pass on to future generations. Our cultural and natural heritage are both irreplaceable sources of life and inspiration. Places as unique and diverse as the wilds of East Africa’s Serengeti, the Pyramids of Egypt, the Great Barrier Reef in Australia and the Baroque cathedrals of Latin America make up our world’s heritage.

What makes the concept of World Heritage exceptional is its universal application. World Heritage sites belong to all the peoples of the world, irrespective of the territory on which they are located.

A couple of extracts from the original convention (<http://whc.unesco.org/?cid=175>)

further elaborate the conservation aspects of that rationale:

Noting that the cultural heritage and the natural heritage are increasingly threatened with destruction not only by the traditional causes of decay, but also by changing social and economic conditions which aggravate the situation

with even more formidable phenomena of damage or destruction,

Considering that deterioration or disappearance of any item of the cultural or natural heritage constitutes a harmful impoverishment of the heritage of all the nations of the world,

...

Considering that parts of the cultural or natural heritage are of outstanding interest and therefore need to be preserved as part of the world heritage of mankind as a whole,

...

Cultural and Natural Heritage is explicitly defined in Articles 1 and 2 include *monuments* (architectural works, sculpture, paintings etc), *sites* (archaeological), *geological and physiological formations* (habitat of threatened species of animals and plants), **all of which are chosen because of their ‘outstanding universal value’** from one or more points of view including history, art, anthropology, science and conservation.

The World Heritage List

The World Heritage list (<http://whc.unesco.org/en/list>) currently comprises some 851 properties comprising 660 cultural, 166 natural and 25 mixed properties located in 141 *States Parties*.

Australia has proposed and had inscribed on the World Heritage List a total of 17 properties as follows (<http://whc.unesco.org/en/statesparties/au>):

Cultural

- [Royal Exhibition Building and Carlton Gardens](#) (2004)
- [Sydney Opera House](#) (2007)

Natural

- [Australian Fossil Mammal Sites \(Riversleigh / Naracoorte\)](#) (1994)
- [Fraser Island](#) (1992)
- [Gondwana Rainforests of Australia](#) (1986)
- [Great Barrier Reef](#) (1981)
- [Greater Blue Mountains Area](#) (2000)
- [Heard and McDonald Islands](#) (1997)
- [Lord Howe Island Group](#) (1982)
- [Macquarie Island](#) (1997)
- [Purnululu National Park](#) (2003)
- [Shark Bay, Western Australia](#) (1991)
- [Wet Tropics of Queensland](#) (1988)

Mixed

- [Kakadu National Park](#) (1981)
- [Tasmanian Wilderness](#) (1982)
- [Uluru-Kata Tjuta National Park](#) (1987)
- [Willandra Lakes Region](#) (1981)

More specifically, the Oxley Wild Rivers National Park is one of the properties comprising the **Gondwana Rainforests of Australia** which was inscribed in 1986 (formerly known as 'Central Eastern Rainforest Reserves of Australia).

This site, comprising several protected areas, is situated predominantly along the Great Escarpment on Australia's east coast. The outstanding geological features displayed around shield volcanic craters and the high number of rare and threatened rainforest species are of international significance for science and conservation.

At the recent ceremony marking the renaming of this property, the Assistant Minister, DEWR, observed that:

"Few places on earth contain so many plants and animals whose ancestors can be traced through the fossil record and today remain relatively unchanged".

It is possible that since residents on the New England districts live in close proximity to properties like the Oxley Wild Rivers National Park then, as 'insiders' (i.e. Australians in general and locals in particular), the risk is real and probably high, that we do not appreciate fully their uniqueness. The risk then is that we are all too willing to contemplate developments that should never be contemplated, at least not in those environments.

International Obligations to Protect Properties under the World Heritage Convention

The World Heritage Convention makes it crystal-clear that Australia has an international obligation to do all that it can to ensure that properties such as the Gondwana Rainforests of Australia are in no way deliberately degraded. The following extracts from the official website state (<http://whc.unesco.org/?cid=175>):

II. NATIONAL PROTECTION AND INTERNATIONAL PROTECTION OF THE CULTURAL AND NATURAL HERITAGE

Article 4

Each State Party to this Convention recognizes that the duty of ensuring the identification, protection,

conservation, presentation and transmission to future generations of the cultural and natural heritage referred to in [Articles 1 and 2](#) and situated on its territory, belongs primarily to that State. It will do all it can to this end (our emphasis), to the utmost of its own resources and, where appropriate, with any international assistance and co-operation, in particular, financial, artistic, scientific and technical, which it may be able to obtain.

Article 5

To ensure that effective and active measures are taken for the protection, conservation and presentation of the cultural and natural heritage situated on its territory, each State Party to this Convention shall endeavor, in so far as possible, and as appropriate for each country:

to adopt a general policy which aims to give the cultural and natural heritage a function in the life of the community and to integrate the protection of that heritage into comprehensive planning programmes;

...

to take the appropriate legal, scientific, technical, administrative and financial measures necessary for the identification, protection, conservation, presentation and rehabilitation of this heritage (our emphasis);

...

As a signatory to the World Heritage Convention, the binding international obligation upon all Australians, be they members of Federal, State or Local Governments, private sector organisations or ordinary individuals clearly is to protect and conserve properties such as the Gondwana Rainforests of Australia.

GVEPA's concern is that the proposed landfill has already been adjudged, by the Federal Government's Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation (EPBC) to be likely to flout that obligation. On 1 October, 2007 that peak, environmental committee ruled that:

The project is likely to have a significant impact on:

- *World heritage properties (Sections 12 and 15A)*
- *National Heritage places (Sections 15B and 15)*

Whilst GVEPA is still awaiting detailed advice from the Council and/or its Consultants¹ on the precise reasons for the EPBC decision, we believe that one major factor is the likelihood of leachate escaping the landfill and polluting the World Heritage waterways.

¹ At the time of writing, GVEPA is waiting for a response to two letters seeking advice from the Mayor about the EPBC decision and other landfill matters dated 3 March, 2008 and 2 June, 2008

GVEPA's research has left it in no doubt that all landfill's will eventually leak because their barrier systems deteriorate underground and pollute groundwater. Once this happens, remediation is almost impossible to achieve: environmental damage will already have been done.

It is our collective obligation to the international community, as Australians, to not permit any development that will prejudice and accelerate change to this place of "outstanding universal value".

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