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STANDING COMMITTEE ON ENVIRONMENT, CLIMATE CHANGE AND BIODIVERSITY
Dr Marisa Paterson MLA (Chair), Ms Jo Clay MLA (Deputy Chair), Mr Ed Cocks MLA

Submission Cover Sheet

Inquiry into ACT's heritage arrangements

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Mark Butz

Facilitator | Consultant | Trainer | Writer/Editor

Working from Ngunnawal Country

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[REDACTED] [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]

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Committee Secretary
Standing Committee on Environment, Climate Change and Biodiversity
ACT Legislative Assembly
GPO Box 1020
CANBERRA ACT 2601

By email: LCommitteeECCB@parliament.act.gov.au

Submission to Inquiry into the ACT's heritage arrangements

Thank you for the opportunity to submit comments on ACT heritage arrangements.

In my work I am made aware of widespread and longlasting frustrations in the community about heritage arrangements in the ACT. I have lived in Canberra since 1980.

My background is as an environmental science graduate, with more than 26 years in senior positions in environment and heritage agencies of State, Territory and Federal government. This is complemented by more than 35 years of voluntary participation in the community sector, and work since 2002 as a consultant, facilitator, learning practitioner, researcher and writer. Most recently my work focus has been on heritage research and documentation, and professional interpretation of heritage places and landscapes.

I am a Member of the Environment Institute of Australia & New Zealand (and EIANZ Heritage Special Interest Section), Interpretation Australia, Canberra & District Historical Society, Australian & Aotearoa New Zealand Environmental History Network, Canberra Region Heritage Researchers, ACT Regional Studies Network, and a co-opted member of Engineering Heritage Canberra.

SUMMARY

With regard to heritage in the ACT, I am advocating for:

- Greater integration of intentions and practices for protection and management of the environment (e.g. biodiversity/protected areas) and heritage – **natural and cultural heritage interwoven**
- A more strategic approach to heritage protection and management through an **ACT Heritage Strategy**
- Balanced investment in the strength of both statutory protection/planning process on one hand and **community outreach and participation** on the other, with distinct and explicit funding
- Drawing on existing models to value, foster and make best use of **community knowledge and capability** for active participation in protection and care of heritage places and landscapes
- Overt identification of the experience of heritage places being part of the ACT **wellbeing** framework – backed by increased investment in **heritage interpretation** (going beyond information)
- Capability to recognise and record places that are of **Local heritage value/significance** – even if this sits outside statutory protection provisions
- Investment in a more accessible **public interface** for the ACT Heritage Register (map-based, not the same thing as the Heritage Map overlay in ACTmap)
- Commitment to ensure **Heritage Grant funding** is not diverted away from community-based entities
- Increased investment in the **ACT Heritage Library**

COMMENTS ADDRESSING TERMS OF REFERENCE FOR THE INQUIRY

a) the effectiveness and adequacy of the operations under the Heritage Act 2004 including First Nations heritage, and approvals provided under the Act

I have no specific proposals to contribute at this stage.

b) the effectiveness of the structure, administration, and operation of the ACT Heritage Council, including the adequacy of governance arrangements between the ACT Heritage Council and ACT Heritage Unit

I have perceived dysfunction and miscommunication in these arrangements, and witnessed a high level of community, and some professional, dissatisfaction.

I have no specific proposals in regard to governance.

c) the adequacy of resourcing for the ACT Heritage Unit

From my external perspective, I see a mismatch between resources and workload.

However, I believe that consideration needs to be firstly devoted to discerning:

- The contribution of an inadequate system in distorting perceptions of workload
- The contribution of unbalanced direction of work, e.g. domination by the urgent at the expense of the important, with the urgent being portrayed as having greater importance or priority
- The exacerbation of perceived workload by an unwillingness to distribute (share) parts of that load

Inadequate system

Early attention is needed to systems and practices. Dysfunction is made worse when additional resources are pumped into a system that is deficient.

Incidences or sources of community frustration can be blamed on inadequate resourcing when they may be as much due to attitude, systems and management that are not matched to a growing task load.

Unbalanced direction of work

I would like to see balanced attention paid to both facets of heritage in the ACT:

- statutory processes to protect heritage by control and enforcement in decision-making; and
- non-statutory processes to protect heritage by influence in decision-making

There is a strong perception that the statutory is more important because it is generally urgent, and there is greater risk evident in 'getting it wrong'. It can often be portrayed as the means of protection, and therefore non-discretionary, and naturally receiving priority in resourcing.

I suggest that investment in influence, by means of community engagement, information, education and activation in favour of heritage (summarised as 'outreach') is every bit as important and effective.

Control and enforcement are triggered by an event, whereas outreach is on-going and pervasive.

This argues for decisions that do not allow diminution of resourcing for outreach at the expense of control and enforcement. For example, the **Heritage Grants** program being used solely to support community-based initiatives and programs, allowing that some of these may have been fostered by the agency.

The important thing here is that the work that is paid for by a grant is being managed by the community entity that is funded. If activities managed and undertaken by the agency need resourcing, then let these be resourced without depleting what is available to community effort through Heritage Grants. If it is an agency program then let that be funded through agency funds, rather than the grants program – and let's address this not by diminishing the grants funding but by bolstering agency funds for the program.

There is an argument here to increase resourcing for the **Heritage Library**. In my view this collection and the highly capable dedicated staff have long been under-resourced, and under-valued for the contribution they make to a more informed and engaged community.

Adequate resourcing could also be vital to the survival of many documents and maps that contain our memories and tell our stories.

Arguments about whether this is administratively part of 'ACT heritage arrangements' are of no relevance to community interests seeking to learn about, investigate and document better our shared heritage.

Unwillingness to distribute workload

From my perspective, I believe the workload on the Heritage Unit has been made more difficult by reluctance to make use of expertise and energy that exists within our community, among highly educated and well-informed individuals and groups.

In common with many (if not most) government agencies, this has come across as: 'We are the experts – we know what we're doing – just leave it to us'.

This undervalues community capability and knowledge, and dismisses community-based practitioners as 'enthusiastic amateurs' when compared with 'in-house professionals', or as 'consumers' rather than as 'partners' or even 'contributors'.

Surviving, let alone thriving, in a time of scarce resources requires best use of all resources – not just the ones you 'own'. No entity is likely to ever be able to 'own' all the resources needed to get the workload done. Being overburdened requires us to share the load.

Where this self-protective approach is in play, important processes at the community interface slow down, drag on and sometimes fail.

I have been involved in a number of registration assessments that were handled in-house by the Heritage Unit, taking on all the actions of nominating and assessing, and only then consulting community interests after the work has been undertaken, rather than enabling community participation in the work.

This gives rise to errors or shortcomings in (for example) background information provided to Heritage Council. When these have been pointed out through a consultation process, there have been occasions the response has been inadequate or non-existent – as a result, errors stand on the record, are accessed by others, and continue to misdirect not only our historical narrative but also decision-making.

We need to sharpen our perception to recognise that 'Consultation' is essentially *reactive*, while 'Participation' is essentially *creative* (enabling contribution). Restrictive consultation does not build relationship, or collaboration, or a community on-side with management efforts.

I recognise fully that there are important limitations in regard to statutory processes, and a protective approach in this direction is understandable in pursuit of integrity and minimising risk.

I see no need for the same approach to be applied at the levels of informational/documentation and communication, and (even more so) in understanding and framing social values in heritage.

In essence I advocate an approach:

- that lets go of absolute control – trusting and fostering **community-based expertise and energy** and making greater use of **suitable consultants** where a contribution can safely be made from 'outside'
- that is open to **multidisciplinary approaches and understandings** – beyond archaeology
- that seeks actively **integration of natural and cultural heritage** as fundamental to both 'environment' and 'wellbeing' (with formal recognition of heritage in the domains of the **ACT wellbeing framework**)
- that exhibits greater appreciation of **landscape** that embodies site – beyond 'points on a map' to understand heritage in three spatial dimensions plus time (continuity and change).

More specific proposals are outlined under f) below.

d) the operation of heritage legislation in other Australian jurisdictions

I have no specific proposals to contribute at this stage.

e) how the ACT's heritage arrangements might be improved to guarantee the ACT Heritage Council achieves its statutory functions

Comments elsewhere in this submission regarding improved systems and communication are relevant to this.

It is reasonable for an enquirer to **ACTmapi** to infer that there is no heritage issue where nothing is shown on the Heritage Map layer. The layer does not show nominations as shading – the enquirer needs to go to the Heritage Register and scan Block numbers in the relevant area to find out whether a place has been nominated.

There is risk of error where (for example):

- a nomination is assessed on inadequate information (see comments under c) above). This may result in their rejection for entry to the Heritage Register.
- nomination/ assessment processes are protracted, whether due to workload, or misplaced nominations etc. While awaiting assessment, the area has no presence on the Heritage Map in ACTmapi.

In both cases, poor process or communication has potential to subvert the Council's statutory function.

As an example:

- 'Majura House' is conspicuously unshaded in the Majura valley area of the Heritage Map
- One would have to consult the separate Heritage Register to find that it lists Block 59 Majura as an area that has been Nominated – but there is no link to any information.
- It is presumed to have been nominated from 1999, but this may have been earlier, as it was on the Register of the National Estate in 1986 and was recommended to be placed on the Interim Heritage Register upon transition to self-government in 1989. There was no action on that nomination until the 2020s, and it remains incomplete (but in progress).
- 'Majura House' is no longer 'Block 59', being shown on ACTmapi as Blocks 715 and 716 Majura.

f) any other related matters with respect to the ACT's heritage arrangements

Local heritage

I see significant frictions develop when community members do not see their interests being acknowledged or respected in decision-making about heritage places. One factor in this is the inability for the ACT Heritage Register to recognise and record a place that is of **Local heritage value/significance**. i.e. a district or local community values it, but it has not met the threshold of being significant at Territory level.

At present a place that is assessed as having fallen short of the criteria for listing is shown on the Heritage Register as having been Rejected. The effect is an assumption that the place: does not enrich our understanding of history and identity; does not warrant legal protection or require advice by the Heritage Council on development issues to ensure good conservation outcomes; and does not warrant being eligible for development and architectural advice and funding from the ACT Heritage Grants Program.

Notably, it will appear to an enquirer that the place has been assessed and rejected and it seems reasonable to assume that there are therefore no heritage issues or limitations relating to it. It is not flagged as having any value that has to be taken into consideration.

For a community that has put considerable effort into a nomination this is a most dissatisfying outcome. It may result in the loss of a place important to that community. It may discourage further community engagement. It may discredit or taint the larger picture of heritage protection in the ACT.

The issue here is not whether a place should or should not fall short of a Territory-level value threshold, but rather that if it does fall short there is nowhere else to go in our current heritage arrangements.

I would advocate for a system that:

- can recognise places that are of Local significance (based on assessment criteria)
- tags them explicitly on the Heritage Register and the Heritage layer of ACTmapi as Locally significant – rather than as failed or rejected nominations
- has some provision (perhaps a specific segment/allocation in grants funding) that can support a community to care for a heritage place that they value; and
- includes these locally significant places in the way we celebrate our heritage across the Territory.

Note there is no suggestion here for a change in the statutory protection provisions of the Act, or a lowering of standards. This recognition of Local significance can sit outside the control and enforcement aspect and be seen more as part of the influence aspect of heritage arrangements in the ACT.

Communication

Current communication through the Canberra Tracks and Heritage Grant programs has been exemplary, although seemingly constrained, and they reflect the high level of capability and the tenacity of the officers who drive and support them on an on-going basis.

Beyond these programs I strongly encourage investment in enhanced approaches to communication with the community, at a range of levels:

- the on-line interface for the ACT Heritage Register
- development of Heritage Communication as a field comparable to Science Communication
- strengthening of capability for Heritage Interpretation, going beyond provision of information
- overt identification of heritage within the ACT Wellbeing Framework.

At the most basic informational level, the ACT Heritage Register **on-line interface** is quite clunky.

A map-based interface would enhance the ability of the community to connect with information about heritage places in the areas in which they have an interest: What is in my neighbourhood/area of interest? What makes it important? How does it relate to other places in the ACT? This builds understanding.

I would further suggest this map-based interface also signal places of **National and Commonwealth Heritage** Lists. These distinctions/levels are of little direct interest or value to most community enquirers – heritage is what we value, regardless of who is legally responsible for it.

This Heritage Register on-line interface is not the same as the Heritage Map layer in ACTmapi, which is linked to cadastral and planning documents. Comments relating to improved recognition or integration with National and Commonwealth Heritage lists also relate to the Heritage Map in ACTmapi.

At a broader and higher level, we now accept Science Communication as a professional field, and there are qualifications available in that field, including postgraduate level.

I suggest targeted development of **Heritage Communication** with parallel intent and approach.

There is abundant expertise and experience in the community in this area, and as part of the ACT's heritage arrangements there is a positive role that could be played by fostering the field, developing standards and promoting education.

As part of this - a part that can begin immediately - I advocate stronger and directed resourcing of **heritage interpretation** that goes beyond the provision of information. Here is one way I have found useful to illustrate the difference between these, and how they contribute to active community participation:

Information...	Interpretation...	
<i>...stimulates contact and interest</i>	<i>...works directly at levels of learning and experience...</i>	<i>...and may work indirectly to generate levels of response</i>
Learning ABOUT the place gets people started	Learning IN the place gets people more informed & motivated	Learning FOR the place gets people active
Connecting / Engaging	→ Valuing	→ Finding agency
Awareness → Attraction	Appreciation → Attunement → Attachment	Activation → Advocacy
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Information is a beginning – its desired outcome is to reach the community at the level of awareness of and attraction to a place. In this, the Canberra Tracks program has long been exemplary and needs to be continued, and preferably elevated.

Levels of attachment, and beyond this activation, require interpretation – the desired outcome is a change in the person/visitor.

This is about cultural translation, communication, education, sensations, and meaning. It requires us to work in both cognitive and affective domains, because cultural and heritage significance is the sum of multiple qualities or values of a place or object – aesthetic, historical, scientific, social and spiritual.

Cultural heritage places a value on culture and traditions, and also the ability to pass these on, contributing to shared sense of identity or belonging.

This signifies a primary connection to the still-evolving **ACT Wellbeing Framework**. At present there is no overt recognition of heritage in the framework, but it is highly relevant in multiple domains, in particular:

- a strong and obvious role in ‘identity and belonging’
- a logical element in ‘the environment’, as it is seen in many pieces of legislation, noting that every natural landscape is also a cultural landscape
‘Use of heritage places’ would be no less valid an indicator than ‘use of green spaces’.

I am quite unconvinced by those who suggest a link to heritage will dilute a ‘green’ or ‘sustainable’ message, and by those who seek to separate further agency functions for environment and heritage.

- an obvious place in ‘social connection’ in relation to volunteering and possibly also in relation to participation in events or activities (such as the Heritage Festival)
- perhaps a place in ‘governance and institutions’ – having a say and being heard in decisions about the places we value.

Recognition of the role of heritage within the framework may assist people to appreciate how heritage enriches our lives and our sense of place and identity.

Another major contributor would be enhanced approaches to **community participation in heritage** – going beyond information to activation by investing in provision of real opportunities to participate in documentation and care of heritage places.

This has a direct analogue in existing models and processes for fostering community participation in environmental care, which are very well established in the ACT.

The Park Care system operated by the ACT Parks & Conservation Service has a highly effective approach which offers volunteers streams of activity in which they can participate according to their interests and skills. These include ParkCare Patch (on-ground works/care), Ranger Assist, Visitor Assist, and Wildlife Assist.

Implementation of this system has required in-house professionals to relinquish some level of control and to open up to broader expertise and energy to get the work done. It seems sensible and reasonable to adopt a similar approach to care of heritage places – perhaps Heritage Assist.

There is an existing model for this, as the Parks & Conservation Service has begun to engage their volunteer base, normally focused on biodiversity and the natural world, in the care of heritage places – e.g. the grounds of Rock Valley Homestead in Tidbinbilla.

These opportunities are an example of:

- sharing a cultural asset
- enriching experience, appreciation and learning (these together = valuing)
- signalling the value of a place to affect people’s behaviours in, and towards, that place
- building connections/relationships between people and place, community and heritage values

There is a direct link here to the ‘social connection’ domain of the ACT Wellbeing Framework.

Last but certainly not least, I would advocate that nearly all of the above is addressed through an **ACT Heritage Strategy**. This is an idea that has been proposed by many different practitioners and interest holders over a long period. The absence of such a strategy becomes ever more concerning.

It is difficult to imagine any notable aspect of environmental conservation not having such a strategy – to identify values, places where those values are held, deficits and gaps in protection of those values, mechanisms for protection and on-going care, and framing of communication about heritage etc. – prepared with facilitated, creative interaction with the ACT community. The sooner this is addressed the better.