Social Innovation in Aboriginal Heritage Information Management

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Introduction

This paper is about opportunities for innovation in the management of Aboriginal heritage information in SA. I will tell you a story, set against the present heritage management background, about a current initiative to check site information using technology and what we are learning. I will then suggest areas and issues for investigation.

This paper raises issues to be considered and does not purport to provide ‘solutions’. The objective is to encourage innovative inquiry.

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1 This is a work-in-progress towards papers for Spatial Information Day 2008 and the International Visual Sociology Association Conference 2008. Feedback and suggestions would be welcomed.

2 This paper is produced for the Social Innovation Conference, Adelaide, June 2008. The views expressed in this paper are the author’s and are not necessarily endorsed by the Department of Premier and Cabinet. 19 June 2008.

3 Acknowledgment is given for the invaluable contributions by my colleagues Adam Wood and Peter Birt (AHB/AARD) whose work is referred to in this paper and those other colleagues and heritage stakeholders who generously responded to my request for suggestions.
Heritage information management background

Some backgrounding about Aboriginal heritage information and its management will assist understanding.

Aboriginal heritage information is important to everyone

The Aboriginal Heritage Act (1988) (AHA ’88) refers to Aboriginal sites, objects and remains. There are other aspects referred to as ‘living heritage’ such as language and traditional practices, but I will confine today’s discussion to Aboriginal sites and the role of the Aboriginal Heritage Branch of the Aboriginal Affairs and Reconciliation Division of the Department of Premier and Cabinet (AHB/AARD).

The presence and location of Aboriginal heritage sites in SA is of critical importance to us all. All development in SA is indirectly affected by the Aboriginal Heritage Act (1988) because of the implications of damage to Aboriginal sites. Every Indigenous Land Use Agreement negotiation involves consideration of the presence and protection of Aboriginal sites. In summary, Aboriginal heritage site information is one of the main currencies in transactions about land use in SA.

Management of Central Archive & heritage records held by AHB/AARD

We administer the AHA ’88 which requires that a Register and Archives of site information be maintained. Some sites in our holdings were recorded over 40 years ago. We presently hold records of about 7,500 sites and 1350 cultural heritage reports (in which sites are reported).

A spatially-enabled database (the Central Archives heritage sites database) was set up in 1999 with information drawn from site cards. It is poorly organised; is incomplete with only minimal information from the site cards; has not been often updated over the years with further information; and spelling inconsistencies renders search queries often unreliable. Interrogating the database is time consuming and demanding, for example when we need to identify the names of relevant traditional owners for sites. The inability for the database to

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4 The following section relies partly on work from Wood, Adam. (2008) ‘GIS Strategy for Central Archive and Register of Aboriginal Sites, Objects and Remain’, draft unpublished paper for discussion, AHB/AARD.
communicate with cultural heritage surveys and other records severely hampers and adds unnecessary work.

There are presently three staff involved in heritage information management (HIM) and are insufficient to do what is essential, let alone desirable. Management of heritage information in the past has been carried out to the standards of the day. Before 2006, there was only one person managing the enormous job and responsibility (cultural and legal) for heritage records. The HIM team receives in excess of 100 requests for information monthly about the existence and location of sites, many inquiries are complex and time-consuming, and many involve consultation with the inquirers and often requiring legal advice. Their role is very important. The AHA 88 requires that all sites are not to be interfered with or damaged even if their location is not identified beforehand and the confidentiality of their location and details is to be protected within certain circumstances. Penalties apply. The staff of HIM implement policies to apply the intentions of the AHA 88, and so carry weighty responsibilities. Seeking to innovate is difficult in these circumstances.

In the past three years we have digitised the site records and reports entirely into PDF documents, requiring some 100,000+ separate scans. This has enabled the documents to be viewed electronically by HIM staff via a hyperlink function using ESRI software called ArcView or ArcReader 9.2.

Work is commencing within the Branch, albeit slowly due to the pressure of other work, to review and repair the database and establish a Relational Data Base Management System (RDBMS) which will enable different databases of information to be linked and can allow speedier and more efficient searching of information and responding to inquiries.

All of these technological developments however remain static, in a sense, unless they are able to be expressed in a dynamic form and addressing functional matters.

To do this, a Geographic Information System (GIS) is used, in conjunction with a PowerPoint Data Projector and a heritage site information layer for the particular locations, thus allowing the data to be visualised. Further, it enables different layers of information to be chosen and viewed concurrently. This enables us to view layers of locations of Aboriginal sites; land uses such as pastoral properties, exploration licences and applications; watercourses, lakes; local government areas; and cultural heritage surveys, among others. And these can be viewed against the backdrop of aerial photographs.
We have found that discussions with Aboriginal people about sites in this visual way and in various combinations of visual or written information is enormously effective and valued by them and offers many opportunities.

**Examples of visually consulting within existing system**

We will now give an example of how we have consulted visually and the lessons learned.

In late 2005 as a pilot we consulted with Aboriginal groups from the South East using a combination of the GIS system, data projector and digitised site records for the location (in this paper called our ‘spatial information consultation kit’) and complemented by some summary paper-based information. The meeting was to identify which of some 50 fairly recently recorded sites on Crown Land were sufficiently accurate and known to the parties so we could discuss them without needing to visit them on-country and so act more efficiently. The meeting achieved 90% of its objectives and we learned how difficult it is to use different technological applications together and in an efficient way.

In 2007 two consultations were held with Yankunytjatjara and Adnyamathanha about sites using the spatial information consultation kit.

The Yankunytjatjara consultation arose from a meeting in Coober Pedy when hard copy of lists of their sites was discussed and the meeting was concerned that our records were inaccurate. We subsequently met in Adelaide with two senior men and an interpreter and examined records of about 54 sites. Our records indicated that half were NOT confidential. The meeting resulted in all but 6 being found to be confidential according to Aboriginal tradition and some were particularly restricted to access by senior, initiated men only. The remaining 6 were women’s sites that were not examined because there were no women present to do so.

The Adnyamathanha consultation was to assist an ILUA negotiation and involved two men and a woman who visited Adelaide and inspected approximately 50 site records of their 1200-odd sites. They found significant errors and omissions to those inspected, including records which indicated that sites were NOT confidential when they were.

In both these meetings, the ability to discuss the sites spatially was highly valued by all participants and facilitated understanding and decision-making.
Legal advice as a factor in change

Around the same time we received advice from the Crown Solicitor’s Office that we should review our site records especially to identify which sites were confidential. They urged us to do this “urgently” and with the input of traditional owners and experts. The nature of confidentiality is central to decisions about divulging information and the AHB is responsible to administer policies about both the confidentiality of and access to records.

The AHA 88 says (s 10 1a) that the confidentiality of the information must be maintained unless the traditional owners (or, if none can be found, the (State) Aboriginal Heritage Committee) approve disclosure.5 ‘Traditional owners’ are defined in S 3 of the Act (although no process is stated for their identification) and the definition refers to “social, economic and spiritual affiliations and responsibilities for “sites and objects in accordance with Aboriginal tradition. Confidentiality is therefore interpreted as sites being confidential “in accordance with Aboriginal tradition”.

This matter of identifying which sites are confidential is of great importance to traditional owners, administrators who are responsible to administer the Act and those others who wish access to protect heritage or to facilitate development or both.

The COSI story

COSI stands for ‘Checking of Site Information’. The COSI project was established given the evidence of erroneous site records, especially in regard to their confidential status, and the legal advice. It eventually commenced as a pilot in May 2008 to explore the site contents and to develop methods for consulting in partnership with the particular Aboriginal group. We negotiated an agreement for a representative group of Nukunu people and an adviser to collaborate in the development of the pilot and to participate in the actual checking of site records. The records we were able to review were limited to only 18 sites. These were in the Nukunu Native Title claim area, in the part about which there is no overlapping claims with other nearby groups. The balance of sites in the Nukunu claim is in an area that is also

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5 Of importance to administrators of the Act is that disclosure without such authorisation is illegal and brings a fine of $10,000 or imprisonment of 6 months. This is the same penalty for someone who is found guilty of damaging, disturbing or interfering with a site, object or remains.
claimed by the Barngarla group. Other previous Nukunu overlaps with the Adnyamathanha have been resolved between the groups.

The outcome of the meeting was that all sites were declared to be confidential, while they had previously been recorded in our records as non-confidential. We also learned about the role for the use of technology.

**Use of Technology in COSI Consultations – what we have learned from this attempt at innovation**

The spatial information consultation kit was used to examine sites from the non-overlap area.

Preparation was important. The basic maps were prepared by loading aerial images of the actual sites (couple of different sources) onto the map. The sites on the ArcReader were hyperlinked to folders containing the detailed site information. This made access quicker. Site information folders were unmodified straight from the scanned site data. Each folder can consist of up to 5 individual folders containing maps, photos, reports, site cards and slides.

Mixed methods approach became appropriate. Non-technological means were used to facilitate the pilot and complement the technological alternatives. Hard copies of the principal site data (site cards, some photos and report extracts) were prepared and given to the Nukunu representatives on the day.

We found that detailed site information that is presented visually requiring decision-making and using unfamiliar media can easily confuse people and the issue. Multiple data sources were confusing, especially when getting down to detail. This was true to a small extent even for the presenter who is familiar with using information this way.

The decision was taken, in conjunction with the Nukunu participants, to briefly demonstrate the visual data, but for the group to then meet separately relying essentially on their hard-copies to make decisions without undue pressure. This approach gave people time to assimilate the information and for decision-making.

These lessons were as much about non-technological matters and were discussed with the Nukunu participants. We believe that prior distribution of hardcopies so that participants had

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6 The following section relies partly on work from Birt, Peter. (2008) ‘COSI Pilot Evaluation’, a draft internal document for discussion, AHB/AARD.
at least the basic information and the questions well before the meeting will enable them to assimilate it and start a decision making process.

The role for the visual data would then be to provide a framework for informed decisions, rather than as a means of introducing new information. The visual data should clarify, rather than confuse. The focus is to be on the data, not distracted by the media used however the whole exercise needs to be streamlined and cost-effective if it is continued and to be applied across the whole State.

Other lessons included presenting only the necessary information on the day; reducing the number of electronic folders to one for each site and showing photos required to illustrate the site; and to refer to reports only as a last resort. We noted to keep the presentation as simple as possible and limited questions asked of the data to those that are essential for the task. This is in everyone’s interest especially given there will be limits to time couples with greater numbers of sites for consultation in other places.

The use of maps and aerial photos for consultations is effective, but care is needed in presenting detailed information. Too much can confuse people and/or raise more questions than we seek to answer. It is unfair to expect people to instantly grasp the information presented and leave them feeling that they are being forced into a decision they may not be ready to make.

It is envisaged that all preparations for meetings will involve the participation of representatives from the local group in decisions about how to get the best results. The Nukunu spoke positively about the ways in which they were involved as partners in the project.

The technology can be a great tool in presenting data, but only if we get it right. Whiz-bang is only impressive when the message is clear and understood and the objective achieved.

Areas for innovative inquiry

The paper has addressed what is. The following section will consider areas that could be considered as potential sites for innovation.

Certainly the time seems right for innovation in heritage information management. If social innovation is an idea that works for the public good (whether social, cultural, economic and environmental); and is systems-changing in introducing permanent change then the time is
surely now 7. Social innovation isn’t just stories of things that have been achieved...but also speculation of where “thinking outside the square” can help in new areas and ways.

Managing site information differently

Our present focus is about managing information related to about 7,500 sites. We are energetically, diligently and innovatively dealing with these and we are the best resourced Aboriginal heritage branch in South Australia’s history. All Governments are faced with competing demands for resources and we read examples of this in the papers daily. Yet we struggle to make the advancements we believe are desirable.

We know there are more records of sites held by others such as Aboriginal groups but moreso by mining and other land use companies and by heritage professionals. And it is widely believed that the majority of sites simply are not recorded. It is reasonable to speculate that there are hundreds of thousands of sites spread across the landscape. If the records held by others were passed to AHB/AARD we would struggle to deal with them. If 100,000’s of sites were recorded we would be unable to administer the Act in relation to them. This would be overwhelming for any administration of any state or territory under the AHA 88. Development would suffer; Aboriginal groups would be unable to respond; relationships would be threatened.

We need to do some ‘future gazing’, to consider what a different future might be and what to do. Centralized information management by a Government agency located only in the capital city would require gross amounts of resources to administer these numbers under the AHA 88. Enlisting Aboriginal groups in partnerships about recording and managing their heritage records is one alternative. Enabling them to negotiate directly with land use proponents could partly facilitate land use negotiations. Looking to lessons from other states’ reviews could help. Using technology to facilitate decision-making and recordkeeping seems a logical step forward.

New expectations and assumptions

The AHA 88 has expectations and assumptions that are difficult to achieve. It establishes the Minister as final arbiter, and requires an Archive and a Register of Sites to be maintained.

7 Centre for Social Innovation. http://www.socialinnovation.ca/about/social-innovation
The Act presumed there would be only one Register which would be maintained by a Department; that sites when identified would be reported to the Department for recording and that the Department would protect the sites. This suggests a static model, and that ‘Doing Heritage’ would be the province of the Department which would lie at the centre of things, authoritatively controlling the protection and management of sites. Figure 1 simply represents this conception and its outdated nature.

Figure 1: Wagon wheel: AHA 88 perceived as at the ‘centre of the Heritage Universe’

These assumptions or presumptions have proved to be wrong and a more effective and relevant model is needed. This would have the Department influencing and facilitating rather than controlling (or thinking it did); the Department is perceived to be one of many participants; having a role as networker rather than the ‘centre’; and the concept of one, central, universally patronised Archive of sites would be displaced by one with decentralised local archives where Aboriginal groups manage their own heritage information, in direct negotiation with land use proponents and in partnerships with Government. Figure 2 below is a picture in which connections and complexity are emphasised. The variations in node size represent the amount of content of that particular node and the more connections it has. This suggests a universe that is not centrally coordinated or controlled and emphasises the broad range of networks linking participants.

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Need for a values-based change framework

The future is looming, with exploration and mining ‘booms’; coastal housing developments; the effects of climate change and drought such as Lake Bonney and the Murray. There is a changing social and political climate featured by apologies by the Prime Minister and our Premier on behalf of the people they represent and decisions at the National level to sign the International Protocol about the Rights of Indigenous Peoples which includes references to cultural and heritage matters.

These suggest a need to examine possible futures and ways that competing interests are able to be mediated and reconciled.

It is acknowledged that social innovation can often occur in tandem with technological and commercial innovation but this can be achieved sustainably only if done consciously and strategically and will require a framework and set of values that requires the links to be made. The Capability Approach\(^\text{10}\), a framework initiated by Amartya Sen, a Noble Prize laureate offers such an approach. It is rights-based and complements the International Convention of the Rights of Indigenous peoples to which the Australian Government has announced it will sign up. Aboriginal development, at the local as well as the national and

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international levels, can be assisted by having a framework based on human rights principles and practices.

The capability approach is also values-based, on explicit values for example of having liberty to determine whether and how to participate. The willingness to participate is generally acknowledged to be pragmatically important for change. The capability approach proposes that what is ultimately important is that people have the freedom, otherwise called capabilities, to choose how to lead their lives. Once they effectively have these freedoms they are then able to choose to act on them. It is a people-centred approach.

The capability approach can be used for evaluating and planning individual well-being and social policies and social change in society. Like most frameworks, it can assist in analysing situations and helping to work out goals and directions and processes to get there. However it is not focussed primarily on achievements but on the capabilities, or real freedoms that people have to achieve.

Other views about innovation in Aboriginal heritage

I sought the views of some 25 people to whom Aboriginal heritage is important. They included heritage practitioners with experience in Government; advisers about the application of technology; mining industry representatives; native title lawyers; state and commonwealth employees and Aboriginal people. I asked them for their ideas about the “three most important innovations that they believe are present or needed in Aboriginal heritage management in SA”. The question was broader than about heritage information management, the subject of this paper, but their responses are useful contributors to making a case for ways in which innovative inquiry could be useful in Aboriginal heritage management.

They were clear that innovation is important and needed and their suggestions ‘fit’ with our working description that social innovation as ‘an idea that works for the public good (whether social, cultural, economic and environmental); and is systems-changing in introducing permanent change.’ Their views of where innovative thought and action could be applied, in no particular order of importance, include the following:

- A spatial framework is seen to enable communication and acceptance across often-competing stakeholder interests.
Our production of a digital spatial framework for Aboriginal heritage records was valued. It was described as “the fundamental key for effective heritage assessment and management in land-use decision-making.”

The “spatial dimension provides a factual, physical dimension...where Indigenous cultural traditions, land use management interests (governments)...and land development interests may effectively communicate”.

And outcomes, while they will not satisfy all stakeholders, will be based on processes that are explicit, transparent, and accountable and based on informed decisions.

- Quality processes for land use decisions and cultural heritage management are seen to be essential. The vital ingredient is “the recognition of and respect for the central role of traditional owners and for their active involvement in defining and conducting decision-making processes”. This can be assisted by a “holistic perspective and integration of Native Title processes, heritage management and Aboriginal cultural practices”.

- We should find ways of celebrating Aboriginal heritage, not just avoiding heritage during development.
  Cultural heritage management is central to our collective sustainability and well being and needs to be explicitly valued. Today’s decisions are important to tomorrow’s future. “The decisions we make now about the cultural heritage we preserve, the cultural traditions we respect, and the changes that we make to accommodate our needs, are fundamental in shaping what our future will be like.”

- Engaging with Aboriginal interests could benefit from the attention of innovative thinkers, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal. While “sometimes the identification of and consultation with this constituency is arduous -it is quintessential to the entire concept of recognising and valuing Aboriginal cultural heritage”. The reasons for data collection could be driven more by Aboriginal aspirations and we could “expand our use of technology outside of our own cultural parameters to allow us to assist other cultures to effectively record and visualise their heritage through technical innovation without limiting the process by applying our cultural rules.”

- Engagement should be direct with Aboriginal groups and not through intermediaries “such as anthropologists, archaeologists and government agencies.” The contributions that can be made by local level groups to heritage management and decisions and their involvement in mainstream discussion about heritage matters was seen to be important arenas for attention. The comment was made that while this is an admirable objective,
local groups often require the resources to organise; plus information and knowledge to participate; and the capacities to participate. Most Aboriginal participants on heritage committees are not in wage-paying jobs, are part-time representatives, parents, caregivers and do not have the supports to carry out the management of what are, in effect, family businesses. These heritage committees have important roles to play in facilitating agreements and so innovative attention to ways to support them and encourage participation would be a useful contribution.

- **Managing Aboriginal heritage information is seen as a complex business.** The information is important for the range of purposes already discussed and so “upgrading the accuracy and completeness of the data” is important. The information is important for development but what should be made available to land users and from what levels of confidentiality?

  Recognition of the ownership of and responsibility for cultural heritage (information, artefacts, objects, ancestral remains) by Aboriginal people, and returning these to the relevant Aboriginal communities and individuals requires a thoughtful approach. There is a range of interests, levels of mistrust, resource implications, and a cohesive vision of the benefits is important. “However, if we, as a State community, are serious about reconciliation, about developing respect across cultures and sharing heritage, then it is a must and I regard it as the highest priority.” There is other material to be considered, the ‘archive’ or ‘history’ aspect - the systematic storage and curation of data collected such as personal oral histories, photographs, songs etc. Who holds and cares for this material in transition to Aboriginal groups owning and curating their own materials, and how might this happen?

- **How Aboriginal heritage should be administered and led more generally was addressed and the proposal made for the establishment of a properly resourced, independent authority.** This can be seen to be associated with calls for innovative consideration of an appropriate Aboriginal Heritage Act for SA. There was a suggestion in regard to duty of care and for a shift in the dynamic of protection of Aboriginal Heritage where the person doing the activity must consider the harm to Aboriginal Heritage by reason of that activity. It requires the person to make an inquiry. The onus shifts and makes land users more accountable. And more general suggestions were made for a heritage review seeking an Act that is more relevant to needs and which can enable more efficiency and focussing of attention and resources. The comment was made that there could be a role for heritage in mediating disputes in land use conflict, and how our databases could serve contemporary needs.
Relevance of the residency in Social Innovation to Aboriginal heritage

Certainly the objectives of the residency in Social Innovation are relevant to the Aboriginal heritage context. The residency goal is “To develop a philosophical and operational (analytical) framework for innovation, continuous improvement and community engagement in the SA public sector so that reforms are sustainable and the drivers of reform are embedded in the institutions of government.”

Assistance with innovative speculation in the Aboriginal heritage context would be welcomed and in conjunction with partner organisations and Aboriginal heritage stakeholders, including the for-profit, nonprofit and public sectors. It would be useful to bring these groups together as innovation can be happening “in the spaces between these three sectors (and) differing approaches can collide to spark new ways of thinking about the challenges we all face.”

Summary

In summary, this paper has given a demonstration of innovation-in-action, of a pilot project where spatial information has been used in partnership with an Aboriginal group to improve the standard of Aboriginal heritage site records. It is an innovation that has many potential benefits for negotiating SA development, for the protection of Aboriginal heritage, and as a tool for Reconciliation.

I have suggested opportunities for innovative inquiry through raising issues about a changing future for managing heritage information; by challenging the assumptions behind existing heritage management approaches; and by proposing a values-based change framework

I have also reported the wide ranging ideas for innovative change from a group of heritage stakeholders’.

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12 Centre for Social Innovation. 

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T1.7 Performance in the public sector – customer and client satisfaction with government services: Geoff Mulgan – Social Innovation, Meeting Unmet Needs


These are all issues to be considered and this paper has not sought to provide 'solutions', but aimed to encourage innovative inquiry.