

A WAY FORWARD

Australian Council of National Trusts

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Population and Communities

Output one of the National Trust Partnership Program (NTPP) for the ACNT
National Heritage Project

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SUMMARY

Under the terms of the National Trust Partnership Program (NTPP) with the Commonwealth Government the ACNT is to coordinate the States and Territory Trusts in promoting public awareness, understanding and appreciation of Australia's heritage and to contribute to the sustainable development of heritage places.

Part of the 2012-2013 program under the NTPP was for the ACNT to provide a paper setting out options for the forward direction of the National Trust movement in Australia and suggested projects for a subsequent NTPP agreement

This paper outlines the issues facing the National Trust in Australia and discusses future directions for the Trust and outlines the inherent strengths of the Trust. These include:

- Widespread community recognition
- Substantial conservation expertise and experience
- Positive regional impacts, for example employment
- Cost effective property management
- Contribution to national policy and regulation development
- Facilitation of better planning outcomes in regard to heritage places
- Skill development
- Access to international experience
- Education within the Australian Curriculum
- Community advice on heritage related issues.

Suggestions for future NTPP agreements include:

- Directed funding for National Trust properties and collections management and conservation

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- Review and renew property portfolios, and better relate them to national and state heritage themes
- Employment of more heritage professional staff
- Upgrade property maintenance and collection management
- Expand and improve training and management of volunteers
- Incorporate broader cultural perspectives into property interpretation and collections management
- Renewal of research and publication programs
- Provision of electronic access to National Trust archives and databases.

INTRODUCTION

The National Trust Partnership Program

Under the terms of the National Trust Partnership Program (NTPP) the Australian Council of National Trusts (ACNT) will work with State/Territory National Trusts to support the Commonwealth Government' national priorities to:

Promote public awareness, understanding and appreciation of Australia's heritage; and

Contribute to the preservation and sustainable development of Australia's heritage places.

This document presents a report complying with Output One of the 2012-2013 NTPP agreement is:-

Output One – Future NTPP Agreements– A paper setting out options for the forward direction of the National Trust movement in Australia and suggested projects for a subsequent NTPP agreement

THE TRUST MOVEMENT IN AUSTRALIA

The Australian Council of National Trusts (ACNT) was formed in 1965 to serve the interests of the National Trusts then operating in each of the states and territories of Australia.

The Trust movement had begun in 1945 with the establishment of the first Trust in New South Wales, followed by South Australia (1955), Victoria (1956), Tasmania (1960), Queensland (1963), and Western Australia (1964). The two territory Trusts – the ACT and Northern Territory – were both established in 1976. The National Trust movement is Australia’s largest community-based conservation organisation and the only one concerned with all aspects of heritage conservation – cultural, natural, Indigenous, collections, and non-tangible heritage.

The National Trusts today have a membership of over 70,000 and a substantial volunteer base. These volunteers assist the Trusts in working to ensure that the network of the Trust’ heritage properties nationwide is open to the public, and supporting the conservation work of the Trusts through their contribution to technical and other committees nationwide.

THE PRESENT AND THE FUTURE

Issues facing the National Trust

The National Trust movement in Australia, and indeed the not-for-profit environmental and cultural heritage sector generally, is now facing major challenges. As we continue into the twenty-first century the Australian community is now more diverse and has a more sophisticated view of its history, and communal heritage has to match community expectations. Particularly challenging for the Trust, with its large property portfolio, is that while visitation to historic sites has substantially fallen in the past two decades, community interest in heritage places appears to have increased.

Community expectations concerning the presentation and interpretation of heritage sites have soared, and it has become more difficult to secure financial support and to attract members and volunteers to carry out the day to day operations of the Trusts, particularly in regard to its properties. This has created a tension for the National Trust between its responsibilities as property managers and conservers and the work with the community in promoting Australia's heritage. More and more of our limited resources are directed at property management and conservation and away from general community education and outreach

All this makes the sustainable management of our historic and natural property portfolio increasingly demanding.

The key change the ACNT acknowledges is that in the past two decades the historic heritage conservation movement has declined in significance relative to the conservation of the natural environment. This is evident in the emergence and membership of 'green' political advocacy groups.

The conservation of the natural environment attracts a much greater number of volunteers. While this is certainly because there is so little funding for volunteer programs in the historic environment, it also because of increased

community awareness of the natural environment. Reasons for this bias in attitude most likely lie with:

- Increasing concerns with the global implications of threats to the natural environment seem so evident (for example the increasing awareness of global warming and climate change);
- our colonial past seems too associated with demonstrable degradation to the Australian environment; and
- the displacement of Indigenous Australians and the resulting social and cultural implications.

Whatever the cause, the effect is evident, and particularly impacts on those caring for historic heritage places.

Not long after its formation in the states and territories, the National Trust movement achieved its first major objective, which was statutory protection of Australia's heritage places.

This achievement, however, has been a somewhat paradoxical one, for the government agencies that have been created to administer these statutory regimes, also carry out some of the Trust's original functions - education and conservation particularly (for example Commonwealth and state sponsored heritage festivals) - and are often much better funded than the Trusts.

What then is the role the Trusts currently play in national heritage protection?

The Commonwealth government has committed to a valuable annual contribution of \$927,000 to the National Trusts through the National Trust Partnership Program, which is orientated to specific projects. However, it should be emphasised that the Trusts contribute significantly more of their own resources (both financial and in-kind) to the projects. While the Commonwealth funding is most welcomed by the Trusts it is insufficient to carry out the custodian role to which Trusts have been entrusted. Moreover,

many smaller Trusts find themselves in a 'catch 22' position in that they have limited resources to undertake projects and so are unable to bid for NTPP funding in their own right.

A way forward

What would be the most appropriate means to redress this dilemma?

The ACNT would argue that it was Trust conservation action that first demonstrated the value of historic places to the community, that stretched the paradigm then operating—'if it's old, tear it down'—that first fired community interest in its heritage. It is this capacity to respond to community interests, to act independently on the community's behalf, which is the hallmark of the National Trust.

While the Trust is recognised by the community as its heritage advocate, increasingly the work of the Trust is not bearing banners in the street, but fostering knowledge, awareness and understanding of our heritage and informing public debate over heritage places. It may be that the lack of perceived need for direct action to 'save' an iconic site deters commitment to historic heritage advocacy, yet this argument is contradicted by the often vociferous community protests against planning changes in heritage areas in inner suburban areas (for example the planned developments in and around the central business district of Adelaide, the threats to the World Heritage listed Great Barrier Reef and the ancient rock engravings in the Dampier region of north-west Australia). These protests are generally supported by the Trusts, but often now through informed mediation, as the more sensible, professional and successful way.

It is now more difficult to attract new volunteers to support the management of heritage places, rather than to fight to save them, but the lack of programs supporting community conservation of historic sites contrasts dramatically

with the many well-funded environmental conservation programs that have attracted thousands of community members to volunteer to conserve natural heritage sites.

Over the years, an increasing amount of the capacity of the Trusts has been directed away from active conservation and protection campaigns and its resources have been increasingly directed towards the management of (saved) properties.

The ACNT has recognised the need to review continually the strategies and direction of the National Trust movement, if it is to remain relevant and justify the government and community support that it receives. State and territory Trusts likewise are constantly reviewing their activities and finding cost-effective ways of achieving the objective of conserving historic heritage places.

Indeed, in 2005 the ACNT undertook a complete review of its operations.ⁱ As part of this review, the ACNT has identified the strengths of the National Trusts and also the major issues and concerns that it needs to address. These will be briefly discussed in turn below.

Strengths of the National Trusts

While each state/territory National Trust has varying management models and operation objectives they share a number of individual and combined strengths:

Substantial conservation expertise and experience—National Trusts have a long history and corporate conservation culture extending back more than 60 years, which can be applied to new challenges.

Widespread community recognition—The words ‘National Trust’ have very high and positive community recognition associated with heritage conservation. The National Trust logo is well recognised. The organisation is held in high regard across the country.

Substantial volunteer base—While diminishing, the National Trusts retain a significant volunteer base, in both rural and urban areas, providing a range of skills and a significant contribution of time and resources to conserve heritage places and collections. The Trusts are able to secure volunteer support even in remote and low population areas, to preserve local heritage. These volunteers link communities to the protection of their heritage places and foster a sense of community ownership.

Positive regional impacts—The properties owned and operated by National Trusts strengthen local identity and provide job opportunities in regional and rural areas, and this has significant flow-on benefits to these communities.

Cost-effective property management—National Trust properties operate on a cost base significantly below government-owned properties, because of the extensive volunteer input and rigorous cost management practices.

Contribution to policy and regulation development—National Trust Committees and experts make significant contributions to the development and implementation of government policies, regulations and programs, contributing their practical and detailed experience and knowledge, often at no charge.

Facilitation of better planning outcomes—The National Trust, through its community connections, contributes to achieving better planning outcomes by ensuring developers, local councils and the community are better informed about the heritage value of places and the range of options available to them in order to achieve a more balanced outcome, including the long-term conservation of heritage values.

Skill development—Through their extensive networks, the National Trusts develop the skills of heritage and building professionals, tradespersons and volunteers on building and collections conservation, providing community benefit at low cost. However, it should be recognized that the skill base in many professions relating to building and conservation is declining in Australia and Government support – through TAFEs for example is needed.

Access to international experience—The National Trust movement draws on the expertise and knowledge base of similar organisations in many countries, exchanging information and ideas at international gatherings and through widespread networks. For example, the ACNT has an International Ambassador to the International National Trust Organisation (INTO). INTO is an international network of National Trusts and similar non-government organisations, globally diverse but united by a shared commitment to conserving and sustaining our shared heritage – built and natural, tangible and intangible. INTO works to develop and promote best conservation practices, increase the capacity of individual organisations, establish Trusts where they do not presently exist, and provide advice in the interests of heritage conservation.

Education and community advice—Because of their community recognition, Trusts are seen as a source of credible and independent advice to the community on conservation and heritage matters, including history, environmental and heritage education, and this advice is provided generally at no or a low cost to the community. Education, particularly the schools programmes the Trust have developed for their properties – with the support of the Commonwealth - is now becoming the most important function of the Trusts throughout Australia. The Trusts are now developing and implementing school programmes to fit into the Australian Curriculum.

These strengths of the National Trust movement demonstrate its capacity and its capability as a cost-effective deliverer of heritage conservation services for the community. They also demonstrate the basis for the widespread community and international recognition and respect the Trusts enjoy.

However, given these inherent strengths within the National Trust movement there are concerns regarding their sustainability into an uncertain future.

Concerns and issues

Despite the many strengths of the National Trust movement, there are a number of key issues and concerns that the movement has been attempting to address in recent years. These include the following:

Ageing and declining membership and volunteer bases—National Trusts in some jurisdictions are experiencing difficulties in attracting younger members and expanding their volunteer base (although this varies across the Trusts).

These difficulties may be a result of a now increasing requirement for higher skills and training for volunteers, particularly when dealing with the public. There is no question that heritage conservation and interpretation has become more complex and there are greater impositions put on to volunteers to meet required standards in visitation and education programmes. To meet these expectations Trusts have to provide the initial and follow up training for the volunteers from within their own resources. What is needed is better funding for training and resources to facilitate a better practice in volunteer management and efficacy.

Renewal of Trust property and collection portfolios—National Trusts recognise the need to review their current holdings of heritage places and collections, to ensure they are appropriate to Trust objectives, reflect contemporary society and can be managed within the financial constraints. However, the Trusts do not have the resources to undertake this difficult and sensitive task, and existing portfolios do not therefore necessarily provide the most appropriate representation of the heritage of the community they represent constraints (for example, the South Australian National Trust has adopted a 2012-2015 Strategic Plan aimed at existing and managing properties with ever-reducing funds)ⁱⁱ. Similarly, the lack of resources for ongoing conservation and renewed interpretation of heritage sites can entrench conservative attitudes, deter visitation and make it harder to attract new volunteers.

While the Trusts are aware and are actively dealing with this issues it nevertheless imposes an extra strain on existing resources.

Anti-development image—Because Trusts have been involved in campaigns to protect heritage places, the Trust can be viewed as anti-development by certain developers and property owners. However, while the Trusts will argue strongly for the conservation of important places, they have often been able to facilitate excellent outcomes for the preservation and use of heritage properties, because their views are based on sound heritage conservation policies that do take account of various community interests. The Trusts have been a strong voice in support of owners of heritage properties, and this aspect of their work needs greater recognition.

Lack of resources—National Trusts in general across the country (and particularly in the smaller states and territories) suffer from a chronic lack of funding and resources. Funding is primarily from government grants and

membership fees, with small amounts of donor funding. However, most properties operate at a loss, and there is not sufficient funding to adequately conserve the properties and collections or to provide quality interpretative and public programs. Trusts have been forced to cut back in areas like education and community advice, so as to divert limited resources into marketing and fundraising. The lack of resources extends beyond property maintenance to administration and operating costs of the Trusts themselves.

Colonial focus—Trusts are conscious that, because of the lack of resources, their current properties and collections do have a bias towards 19th Century heritage and hence seem focused on British or Colonial heritage. Trusts would, if more resources were available, be able to expand their heritage conservation activities to focus on more recent periods and the diversity of cultures that now form part of Australian society, particularly Indigenous and multi-cultural heritage.

The move away from the ‘stately home’ museum has been under way for some time, but the current Trust property portfolio imposes considerable constraints. All Trusts actively promote a variety of heritage projects, including Indigenous and multicultural heritage, and less mainstream topics such as industrial and rural heritage, but the majority of flagship properties remain ‘colonial’.

Weak sponsorship support—Trusts have experienced considerable difficulty in attracting sponsors for built heritage conservation, as most private sponsors appear more interested in funding nature conservation projects and other charities. The number of competing charities has grown significantly in recent years, and the National Trusts have struggled to secure ongoing support and major funding.

The reasons for this are not clear, but it may be linked to the relatively local nature of built heritage, and the limit this places on the breadth of exposure Trust sponsorship could provide. It is easier to obtain sponsorship for

heritage events, and well nigh impossible to achieve sponsorship for conservation activities, and this may be because there is a perception that government should fund heritage conservation, or because conservation of itself doesn't appear to appeal to potential sponsors.

Volunteer management—Another of the problems associated with a lack of funding is the difficulty in providing supervision and ongoing training for volunteers. Trusts are aware they need to upgrade the quality of interpretation and education at places visited by the public, but that requires comprehensive volunteer management programs and training resources, which unfortunately they cannot currently provide.

A key issue, for example, is the increasing complexity of the management of heritage places. Conservation and interpretation are now more professionally managed, less autonomy is allowed to volunteers, and greater sophistication is required of them. The once relatively simple task of presenting a property pleasingly and telling a linear story about it to visitors has been transformed into detailed interpretation plans requiring the recounting of multiple histories, and the placement of the site into a broadly acceptable historic context. This can be very demanding of volunteers, and certainly deters some of the more traditional volunteer cohort.

Skill development—Trusts also recognise that they are struggling to provide support to staff and to their professional volunteers (working on Trust boards and committees), to ensure they are being exposed to the latest ideas and information on best practice heritage conservation and education. Trusts do not have resources to invest in such staff professional development. Salaries paid to National Trust professional officers are generally well below those paid to equivalent positions in government or the private sector and they are often asked to put in additional unpaid hours.

Information management—Despite the existence of a large amount of knowledge and information in each Trust, the lack of sophisticated databases

and information sharing programs means that access is restricted internally and externally. This diminishes the effectiveness of the Trust movement considerably. In terms of public benefit, the fact that this knowledge is not readily available is a major concern. Investment in such information sharing requires resources that are scarce under current funding arrangements. Some Trusts, such as Victoria, are now developing iPhone apps and virtual tours of properties but these are expensive to deliver.

Quality of heritage experience—Heritage places must compete with other attractions for public attention, and the standard of experience must be of a similar high quality to that available in publicly-funded museums, art galleries and historic houses. Trusts are conscious that they are generally unable to compete with such venues where considerable government funding allows professional interpretation, changing exhibitions and frequent events to be provided. The Trusts struggle to provide a similar quality experience with considerably less funding. Many Trust properties seem tired, their interpretation is sometimes inappropriate, most need renewal.

A way forward – possible solutions/options

Recognition of the contribution of the National Trust movement

There is a need for a realistic and independent assessment of the contribution of organisations like the National Trusts to heritage conservation, and recognition of the value of the work undertaken to secure benefits to the community from heritage.

Recognition should work both ways: by governments for the high level of conservation expertise and experience which the National Trust can draw on from their staff and volunteer bases; and by the National Trusts themselves for the benefits to the heritage that can be inherent in closer associations with government heritage authorities.

The importance of recognising that the historic and natural environments belong to us all and that sustainable management should involve us all (government and non-government) should form the fundamental basis for working together. It makes sense to work together to prevent or reduce damage to heritage places, resolve potential conflicts before they arise, and to maximise the benefits and outcomes of sustainable development.

An example of such a collegiate option would be for Commonwealth and state/territory governments to allocate a permanent position on their heritage councils for a member from the respective National Trust council. Such a position would facilitate high-level consultation between government and the National Trust at an initial and timely level in decision-making processes regarding heritage issues. It would also allow government a direct conduit into the skill and experience base of the National Trusts throughout Australia.

FUTURE FUNDING – National Trust Partnership Program

The National Trusts Partnership Program (NTPP) is a joint program between the ACNT representing the state and territory Trusts and the Commonwealth Government, administered by the Department of Sustainability, Environment, Water, Populations and Communities. The program provides on-going funding to the Australian National Trusts to support activities that increase public awareness, understanding and appreciation of Australia's cultural heritage, and enhance and promote its conservation and assist the Trusts to advocate and work for the preservation and enhancement of Australia's cultural heritageⁱⁱⁱ. Under the terms of the (NTPP) with the Commonwealth Government the ACNT is to coordinate the states and territory Trusts in promoting projects which are consistent with these activities

The ACNT suggests future funding within the NTPP should develop programs, which fall into the following broader categories.

Directed funding for property management—There is justification for more government support to heritage conservation in recognition of the non-market benefits to the community. It is proposed that this funding should primarily flow to the NFP sector as the area where the most value can be received from additional funding. In particular, funding is needed to allow National Trust properties to raise their standard to that achieved in government-owned and operated properties where considerably more funding is provided.

It is, however, realised that self-generated funding from commercial enterprises is also crucial to increasing revenue income. For example the NSW National Trust obtains up to 24% of its income from the Bushland

Management Services if operates as a commercial business.^{iv} This enterprise by the NSW Trust provides a high quality and innovative range of environmental restoration services to land management agencies in New South Wales.

Provide funding to support professional development and education programs —The National Trust organisations are generally lacking in resource capability to attract, develop and utilise the skilled resources available to them, and to make these resources available to the Australian community, educators and the volunteers. Specific funding and opportunities are required to allow the Trusts to:

- review and renew property portfolios, and better relate them to national and state heritage themes
- employ more heritage professionals
- upgrade property maintenance and collection management
- expand and improve training and management of volunteers
- incorporate broader cultural perspectives into property interpretation and collections management
- renew research and publication programs
- provide electronic access to Trust archives and databases.
- expand development of online and iPhone applications aimed at attracting and informing the younger generation.
- develop more small-scale national conferences (such as the 2013 National Trust conference in Cooktown) and shift away from larger scale more expensive conferences.
- provide direct and untied funding, specifically to the smaller Trusts which are at this time under severe financial strain, to enable them to operate efficiently and effectively.

CONCLUSION

While many of the above solutions and options may be seen as a Utopian vision for the future given the economic fluctuations and apprehension of our present time, the Trusts must continue to be viable and to offer the public voice on heritage values to the respective governments.

The National Trust's legacy to Australia lies overall in its attempts to establish a sense of identity and a sense of place in our ever-changing cultural and technological environment. In its years of operation the National Trust movement has had to steer an often-difficult path between those authorities with a boots and all ideology of progress even if its costs erase the physical remains of the past, and those in the community (and often within the membership) who seek refuge and comfort in the past.

The pathway forward now for the Trust lies in developing and further implementing their education and community programs together with government. There is now in Australia the best opportunity to do this by working with government in developing and implementing specific education programmes that will fit into the framework of the National Education Curriculum being established. This process has now begun with financial assistance from the Commonwealth Government under the National Trust Partnership Program.

However, the Trust must not shy away from their advocacy roles and must continue to step forward and argue sensibly and tactfully for the conservation and protection of Australia's tangible and non-tangible heritage whenever the need arises.

REFERENCES

ⁱ Minter Ellison Consulting, 2005, *Review of the Operations and Organisational Structure of the Australian National Trust Movement*, Minter Ellison (Canberra).

ⁱⁱ National Trust of South Australia Strategic Directions 2012-2015 *Changing Directions*, <http://www.nationaltrust.org.au/Assets/6692/1/StrategicPlan2012-2015.pdf>

ⁱⁱⁱ Department of Sustainability, Environment, Water, Population and Communities, *National Trusts Partnership Program*, <http://www.environment.gov.au/heritage/programs/nntp/index.html>

^{iv} National Trust of New South Wales, Annual Report 2011/2012, <http://www.nationaltrust.org.au/nsw/reports-papers>