Proceedings of the Conference of the World Forum for Acoustic Ecology, Atlanta Centre for the Arts, FL, March 23-26, 2023

‘A restless triumphant music' - heritage and sound in 19th century Western Australia

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ABSTRACT

The fundamental principles underpinning heritage conservation in Australia have long recognized that places may have sensory values that contribute to their significance. As such, acoustic values should be assessed as part of the evaluation process. But there is still no agreed methodology for identifying, describing, or assessing the way places sound as part of the heritage assessment process, and acoustic values are therefore rarely present in heritage citations. Even if sound is not determined to be a significant cultural heritage value, it can be a valuable tool in interpretation. This paper discusses the historic sounds of places valued by the Colonial community during the earliest period of settlement in the far southwest forest region of Western Australia. It then examines the acoustic experiences of these places today and their management after two decades during which the concept of 'soundscape' has become more mainstream, and asks whether acoustic values are being recognised and appropriately protected.

INTRODUCTION

The practice of assessing places of cultural heritage value in Australia has been underpinned by a strong set of guiding principles. These were first established by the Australian International Council for Monuments and Sites in 1979 and are contained in the Burra Charter. The Burra Charter sought to shift the understanding of heritage places from categories used in other jurisdictions (such as monuments, sites, gardens) to an inclusive, holistic approach based on the values any type of place might hold.

The paradigm has since been expanded and now includes five key evaluative criteria: aesthetic, historic, scientific, social and spiritual value.[1] This systematic, criterion-based approach is regarded as best practice and has been adopted in all states and federally in Australia.

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The objective of this approach is to identify all the values that contribute to a place having cultural heritage significance. However, one consequence of its widespread acceptance has been a lack of investigation into its successful application. The methodology has come to function as a ‘primary frame’, a way of thinking that is so widely accepted it is applied without question. The concern with any primary frame is that those working within its parameters can become ‘frame blind’ and fail to recognize any disjunction between the frame’s objectives and the outcomes it achieves.

In the late 1990s, I began investigating aspects of the application of the primary frame of cultural heritage in Australia by looking at whether it facilitated the identification of cultural heritage values held by past communities. I focused on the area that is now the Shire of Augusta-Margaret River in the southwest of Western Australia. Before colonial settlement, this was Wardandi Boodja, the land of the Wardandi Aboriginal people, who remain and always will be the traditional custodians of the land.

My research period was the first wave of settlement from 1830 to 1880 before the timber industry became mechanized and intensified land clearing and settlement. The two objectives of my research were to determine:

- whether the places that we choose to assess, protect and conserve through heritage listing are the same as those that were valued by people in the past, and
- whether the values that people in the past had for their special places are the same we hold now.

From the extensive archive of letters, journals and diaries written by settlers, I identified places that were significant to the historic community – also known as places of historic social value.

Assessing social value includes considering the aesthetic values held for a place. Aesthetic value in turn requires considering the sensory perceptions of a place, and therefore includes its acoustic qualities.

In this paper, I have gone back into the archives for further evidence of the acoustic qualities and values associated with early settlements and significant place, and examine contemporary challenges relating to their interpretation and management.

HISTORIC AUGUSTA-MARGARET RIVER SOUNDSCAPES

The town of Augusta was established in 1830, three years after the founding of the Swan River Colony and was the first settlement in my study area. It initially comprised about 50 people: colonists and their families together with their indentured servants and their families. It also for a short time had a small detachment of about 15 troops and their families. Despite high hopes, the settlement struggled, largely due to the challenges of clearing the tall timber, and the associated misconception that tall dense forests indicated rich soils. Although a small number of settlers arrived in the following years, by 1936 Augusta had begun to decline as people moved north where the forest was more open, and there was richer alluvial soils to support farming. But for a short time, it was a small lively enclave in the forest, with a rich soundscape filled with meaning.

Although the houses at Augusta were widely separated, the place would have been filled with sound. Most dominant would have been the general sounds of establishing a settlement and setting up farms. Clearing the land was hard work. The dominant tree species, karri and marri, are hardwoods that were difficult to fell. The sound of chopping and processing timber, and building houses and other structures would have dominated the early years, followed by the sound of manual labor working the land. All these sounds were evidence of industry and progress to the settlers. So too were the sounds associated with their animals and livestock – particularly cattle, sheep, chickens, horses and dogs. Their sounds contrasted with the sound of the native animals, particularly the birds, and reminded them of their countries of origin. [1] [2].

Several of the settlers arrived with many young adults and children, such as the Bussell and Turner families, while others such as the Molloys, began their families on arrival. The sound of children's voices would have been common in the early years of Augusta and the presence of healthy, growing families was a further demonstration of successful colonization.

Typical of small new settlements, Augusta had no civic or commercial infrastructure, so people's homes provided a range of services and functions, and there are many observations in the archives about the sounds of social and cultural activities. The 'elegant occupations' of music and dancing were particularly important to several families [3] and diary entries record that dancing often lasted well into the night and even the early morning [4]. Music and dance were a particularly important part of entertaining the intermittent visitors to the settlement such as the crews of American whalers and supply ships, so sometimes there were many people at these informal gatherings. Music and the sounds of people socializing would therefore have regularly drifted through the settlement.

Interestingly, there is little evidence that religious services, which were also held in people's houses, involved singing, so this feature cannot be added to the historic soundscape. Despite its modest size and small population, for some, the soundscape of Augusta was enough to define it as a 'town' that contrasted acoustically with the 'quiet' of the surrounding forest [5].

The sound of settler voices was not localized to homesteads and settlements, but also extended far into the surrounding landscape. People, including women, were highly mobile, typically in groups. The archives record people constantly moving between each other's homes and farms for practical and social reasons, as well as travelling to more distant outposts and other settlements, particularly further north. Travel occurred at all times of the day and night. Men actively explored the new land in a systematic way, often travelling with dogs which chased the native wildlife [6].

Most travel was along tracks. However, there are few references of settlers or explorers having to bash nosily through the bush, and no references to cutting trails by other means. Yet the forest is described as '…so thickly wooded that a life might have been spent without making any visible impression on it' [7]. This indicates the tracks may have been created by the Wardandi people as they moving seasonally through the landscape.

In the second half of my study period, two key outposts were established by Alfred and Ellen Bussell – Ellensbrook Homestead (1854) and Wallcliffe House (1865). Again, these places served the same social and civic functions as the homes at Augusta, however, because they were both located between Busselton to the north and Augusta to the south, and were established after settlement in the Colony had begun to accelerate with the arrival of convicts in 1850, there were many more regular visitors to both these. Again, many people, often in large groups, were hosted here by the Bussell family on their social, business and official travels. As at Augusta, these visits were often accompanied by music and dancing.

Unlike the farming ventures at Augusta, Ellensbrook and Wallcliffe were commercially successful, and the large Bussell family ran large herds of cattle and dairy cows between the two properties, carving tracks through the landscape. The Bussells had five daughters who all worked on the property, including driving the cattle, so the voices of women would have been a recurrent feature along with large lowing herds.

Low key tourism was also a feature in this early phase. The calcified tracts of tree roots in the shifting swales of fine sand at Boranup Sand Patch created an eerie, sublime landscape that appealed to Victorian aesthetics, making it a popular place to take visitors. It was also a place for quiet contemplation to listen to the 'the restless triumphant music of the bubbling ambitious sea' [8].

RECOGNISING, CONSERVING AND INTERPRETING ACOUSTIC VALUES

Nothing remains of the homes of the Molloys and Bussells at Augusta, and only the ruined cellar is left of the Turner's house. All are listed as sites of interest on local heritage lists but the values these places had for the historic community, including the historic sounds associated

[1] Only a selection of archives sources are cited in this paper. Further source material can be found in Reference [2].

with them, are not part of their citations. Their historic soundscapes have been subsumed by the modern town that has grown up and over them leaving limited opportunity for onsite interpretation.

Tragically, Wallcliffe was destroyed in a fire in 2011. It is included in the statutory State Register of Heritage Places and therefore has a more detailed citation, but this does not include any references to acoustic values. Ellensbrook narrowly escaped being destroyed in the same fire. It is also on the State Register but again, there is no recognition of any acoustic values. The Boranup Sand Patch has no heritage listings.

Ellensbrook, most of the Boranup Sand Patch and the landscape associated with Wallcliffe lie within Leeuwin-Naturaliste National Park. The Park is a celebrated tourist destination that receives the highest visitation of all national parks in Western Australia. This is due to its stunning visual landscapes, the opportunities it presents for a range of nature-based recreational and tourism, significant natural values, its heritage and cultural values, and relatively easy accessibility.

In 2015, the Department of Parks and Wildlife released a 10-year management plan for the Park [9]. Encouragingly, it proposes including the remainder of the Boranup Sand Patch in the National Park, but the values of the place have still yet to be clearly articulated.

While the Plan includes management strategies to support the protection of the valued natural, physical, and visual qualities of the Park, there is no reference to its acoustic qualities, or any recognition of the multisensory nature of places and landscapes. The words 'sound', 'noise' and 'acoustic' are not mentioned in the Plan.

Ellensbrook and the Boranup Sand Patch are both surrounded by relatively untouched native vegetation and therefore their landscape context is very similar to what the colonialists experienced. This affords important interpretive opportunities for visitors to gain a sense of what these places were like in the past. By contrast, the site of Wallcliffe House, is surrounded by semi-rural housing.

There is an access road into Ellensbrook and minimal facilities to support it as a tourist destination. Droving cattle is no longer permitted within any national park and the place no longer operates as a farm. The interpretation does not include any farming activities so there are no sounds of livestock or cultivation, and the place sits in a rather sterile greensward. The voices of tourists have replaced the voices of settlers. Nevertheless, the largely quiet natural landscape with its absence of modern anthropogenic sounds, represents an important soundscape that is relatively authentic in terms of its colonial past which should be recognized and more actively managed.

Although there has been sand mining on the eastern side of Boranup Sand Patch, it has had minimal impact on the site overall. However, it is concerning that Boranup Beach, immediately adjacent to the Sand Patch, is one of the few locations in the Park where beach driving is permitted. Beach driving is a recreational activity in its own right but also supports shore fishing. Beach driving is limited overall across the Park and the Plan acknowledges that it can impact the 'remote qualities' of the Park, a rare inference to the negative impact of anthropogenic sound. However, as there has been no assessment of the acoustic (and other) values of the Boranup Sand Patch, the impact of beach driving at this location has not been considered.

CONCLUSION

Visitor numbers to the Leeuwin-Naturalist National Park are likely to increase because of residential growth in the region, its proximity to Perth, the State's capital city, and ongoing improvements in transport and hospitality down to and in the region. The Department of Biodiversity, Conservation and Attractions notes that some parts of the National Park may already have reached carrying capacity, and tourist numbers may have to be actively regulated where possible, such as by reducing the size and capacity of camp sites, or limiting the numbers of people in group bookings at campsites.

Despite this, there continues to be little consideration of acoustic values, either contemporary or historic, and management strategies continue to preference visual perceptions of place over any multisensory appreciation of places and landscapes.

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