AUSTRALIA'S ROCK ART HERITAGE:
PAST KNOWLEDGE FOR A RICHER FUTURE

by

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What is Australian rock art, why is it important and what is the problem?

Australia has one of the most outstanding and diverse rock art records in the world. Rock art consists of paintings, drawings, stencils, engravings (petroglyphs), bas-relief and figures made with the wax of native bees. It is found in caves and rock shelters, on rock platforms and boulders. These are special, often spectacular places that reflect ancient experience, identity, history, spirituality and relationships to land.

From inner Sydney in New South Wales to the Pilbara of Western Australia, from Tasmania to the Top End of the Northern Territory, from near Brisbane to Cape York in Queensland as many as 100,000 individual rock art sites are thought to still exist, with exciting new discoveries made each year. But because Australia has never had a national database or a coordinated approach to rock art documentation, conservation and management the extent of Australian rock art is still unknown.

Australian rock art is extremely important for Indigenous Australians but it is also part of national identity, something that should be a source of great pride for all Australians, as it is in many other countries around the world, including Malaysia. By studying it we can learn about ancient Indigenous Australian cultures, their spirituality, history and relationships to land. The art also informs us
through lengthy sequences, for instance hand stencils. Australia has a mix of large style 'provinces', small internally unique bodies of rock art and junction areas that exhibit a mix of influences (Taçon, 2013), resulting in a complex web of sites across the continent.

**Engravings**

A particularly widespread form of Australian rock art, found across the interior of the continent and near some coastal areas, consists of circle and track engravings associated with a range of other geometric designs (Fig. 2) and occasionally a few figurative motifs such as lizards and birds. The earliest surviving engravings, some dated to at least 13,000 years ago but others thought to be much older, consist of circles, concentric circles, dots, cups and lines (e.g. Fig. 2), often combined with bird, reptile and mammal tracks. It is as if the natural marks of the land were replicated and recombined to tell stories and meaning about the land and how to survive within it. Later, other shapes were added to this repertoire, again often related to what is observed on the land. This form of rock art, also known as anaramitree art, is characteristic of central Australian rock art sites (Flood, 1997). These engravings were produced for many thousands of years and the basic design elements feature in much historic and contemporary Aboriginal art from across the country.

An Australian rock art region famous for its engraved rock art is the Pilbara of Western Australia. Parts of this area are dominated by vast piles of deeply patinated orange-brown boulders, hard granitic rock stained with iron oxide and the ravages of time. Boulder piles stretch for hundreds of metres, sometimes kilometres. Some are relatively low lying while others reach heights of tens of metres. Many of the piles contain boulders with rock engravings, of long extinct megafauna and Tasmanian tigers, fish and other forms of marine life, archaic-looking human-like faces, human figures, birds, reptiles, small mammals and many other subjects. The Dampier region is particularly
rich in engravings, and is considered by many to be the most abundant engraved area of the world. However, this area is also dominated by great industrial complexes, a port for iron ore and natural gas shipping and forms of heavy industry that require the local landscape to be transformed on a grand scale. Hundreds, perhaps thousands, of engraved boulders have been bulldozed, moved, defaced or otherwise destroyed in the process, as much as 20% of the art since the 1960s. Destruction continued on a monumental scale until recently despite world-wide protest, hurried protection orders and changes to heritage legislation (Bednarik, 2006).
North Australian paintings

Although some engraved rock art is found in northern Australia, most sites have paintings and stencils. Indeed, northern Australia is renowned around the world for its rock paintings, with major style provinces centred on the Kimberley of Western Australia, Kakadu-Arnhem Land in the Top End of the Northern Territory and the Laura-Quinkan rock art body of Cape York, Queensland. However, there are lots of other small style areas as well as junction areas between provinces, such as in the northwest of the Northern Territory and the northwest of Queensland (Taçon, 2013).

The Kimberley region of Western Australia is most famous for the Gwion Gwion (sometimes called Bradshaw) paintings, found at hundreds of sites across the Kimberley and as far east as the Keep River region of the Northern Territory (Fig. 3). In recent years these have become contested paintings – in terms of who made them, their age, what they should be called, contemporary Aboriginal significance and who has the right to study them (Taçon, 1998/1999).

Gwion Gwion consist of mostly human figures arranged to suggest a variety of meanings and activities. Large headdresses and a very rich material culture are illustrated, with most figures having lots of tassels, bracelets and other items hanging from their bodies. Most appear to be male although distinctive genitalia are rare. They are portrayed in a range of distinct but related styles that separate them from Wandjina and other Kimberley rock art in profound ways. This has led to the suggestion by rock art researcher Grahame Walsh (2000) that they are non-Aboriginal in origin, having been made at some very ancient time by an as yet unknown race. Various attempts to date the art have produced conflicting results (Taçon, 1998/1999), from about 5000 years ago to over 17,000 years (Roberts et al., 1997). However, research by various people has shown strong links to recent Aboriginal Australian cultures (Welch, 1996) and the Gwion Gwion may well be
The Kimberley is also well known for more recent large paintings of Ancestral Beings – the Wandjina. With these paintings an association between landscape, water and rain was expressed and the paintings continue to be extremely important to Aboriginal people of the Kimberley today. But all Kimberley rock art is under increasing tourism and development pressure and a Kimberley-wide rock art heritage strategy is yet to be developed.

Across northern Australia’s Arnhem Land plateau, and among the outliers and boulders that dot the nearby plains, one of the richest and longest lasting bodies of rock art can be found. What now is referred to as Kakadu National Park and adjacent western Arnhem Land contains at least 20,000 rock art sites with anywhere between a single stencil to sites with over 3000 paintings. Many forms, styles and periods of art activity have been defined and detailed chronologies of rock art change over at least 15,000 years, perhaps much longer, have been produced by several researchers. This area not only contains some of Australia’s most outstanding surviving rock art imagery but also the world’s most impressive.

One of the earlier forms has been labelled ‘Dynamic Figures’ (Fig. 4) by George Chaloupka (1993), the first rock art researcher to study this type of painting in great detail. In this style, likely at least 10,000 years of age, human figures dominate, unlike in an earlier naturalistic style where the focus was on depicting animals. When animals are shown in Dynamic art it is usually in relation to human figures and sometimes human-animal composite beings were depicted interacting with human figures or engaging in human-like activities. The style was named ‘Dynamic’ because action-packed figures were usually painted on rock shelter ceilings and walls, whether they be anthropomorphic, animal or composite. Human figures, almost overwhelmingly male and usually with enormous headdresses, appear to race across rock surfaces, legs outstretched and arms bent with the weight of numerous spears and/or boomerangs they hold. Dots and dashes were placed near the mouths of some figures or around limbs, perhaps conveying a sense of sound and movement.

Western Arnhem Land is also famous for its spectacular X-ray rock art in which internal features of animals, people and some objects are highlighted, alongside their essential outside characteristics (Tacon, 1987). Fish are the most frequent subject, accounting for almost 67% of x-ray depictions (Tacon, 1988) but human females, macropods and birds are also common. Great attention was paid to detail so that different species of fish, mammals, birds and reptiles can easily be recognised. Paintings of animals often occur as bichromes or polychromes with backbones, ribs, long-bones, internal organs and sometimes optic nerves illustrated. Depictions of people and Ancestral Beings usually do not show internal organs, focusing instead on the skeleton and external cultural features such as body painting designs and material culture. At some sites hundreds of x-ray paintings were made in conjunction with images that have striped, hatched, cross-
A lengthy painted rock art sequence can also be found in the greater Laura area of Cape York, northern Queensland, although Holocene painted rock art designs are widespread across much of northern Queensland (e.g., for northwest Queensland see Taçon (2008)). This body of rock art is characterised by distinct anthropomorphs, depictions of spirit beings known as Quinkans, although there is a wide range of subject matter that includes Ancestral Beings, many species of animals, some plants and introduced contact period subject matter such as pigs, horses and native police. The paintings are very striking and attract thousands of visitors each year. As Cole and Buhrich (2012: 74) note: “The Quinkan region is a cultural landscape which is unequalled in Qld with regard to its national and international recognition, the extent and number of rock art sites, and the antiquity, technical diversity, aesthetic qualities and unique style of the art.” Cole and Buhrich also describe in detail the current perilous state of Quinkan area rock art with increasing mining exploration throughout the Laura-Quinkin area, expanding unmanaged tourism and little legislative protection (see below).

Ancestral Beings

Depictions of Ancestral Beings can be found across Australia and at many locations are said to have depicted themselves at sites. For instance, at many locations Rainbow Serpents, all powerful composite beings responsible for some of the greatest acts of creation and destruction, or other Beings are said by Aboriginal Australians to have entered into the rock, leaving their images behind. But elsewhere in Australia it was important for initiated and skilled individuals to portray Ancestral Beings at key locations – for initiation, story-telling and conveying Aboriginal law and lore. For instance, in southeast Australia Baiame, the most powerful creation Being, was painted, drawn or engraved at many locations, especially in the greater Sydney region. This area of southeast Australia is as prolific as many parts of northern Australia for rock art, although the art is very different in form, age and style.

In the rock art of Kakadu-Arnhem Land the earliest depictions of Rainbow Serpents date to between 4000-6000 years ago but many are associated with X-ray paintings and Rainbow Serpents continue to be a popular subject in contemporary Arnhem Land paintings on bark or paper (Taçon et al., 1996). However, stories and depictions of Rainbow Serpents have long been widespread, featuring in the art, ceremony, mythology and story-telling of most Aboriginal Australian societies. In many parts of Australia there are particularly impressive depictions of Rainbow Serpents – large and domineering paintings that often were placed so that they have commanding views of local landscapes (for an example in northwest Queensland see Taçon (2008)).
One of the important Ancestral Beings for Darug, Darkinjung, Wiradjeri and language groups of southeast Australia is the Eagle Ancestor but until recently depictions of this Being were not known from rock art sites. Since the late 1990s many drawn Eagle-like creatures have been found in previously undocumented rock shelters in Wollemi National Park near Sydney and in 2005 a fantastic engraved version of the Eagle Ancestor was located on a rock platform. The most impressive representation (Fig. 6) was first drawn in black, a bit larger than an actual eagle in size. Then a hafted stone axe was stencilled over one wing while a boomerang was stencilled over the other. Later the creature was re-outlined with dry white pigment and glaring white eyes were painted. For local Aboriginal people this and nearby Eagle depictions confirm that the home of the Eagle Ancestor has been relocated and that it remains important despite over 200 years of change brought about by outsiders (Taçon et al., 2008).

Contact period rock art

Throughout Australia the arrival of Asians and Europeans, the animals and objects they introduced and many of the changes they brought about was immortalised in stone. Rock art production did not cease, it merely changed in response to changing times. In some parts of the country, traditional designs continued to be made in rock shelters, on boulders and on platforms until the middle of the 20th Century, with the most recent art produced sporadically until the early 1990s (Taçon et al., 2012).

At rock art sites ships (Fig. 7) and horses were the most popular new subjects painted, drawn or engraved. Hundreds of depictions of ships can be found right around Australia’s coastline and sometimes far inland (e.g. see Taçon, 2012). Horses are more widespread – they are found at sites near the coast and throughout the interior. Modes of transportation seem to have been of particular interest to Indigenous Australians so at rock art sites across the country there are images of a wide range of watercraft, various motor vehicles, air planes and even...
the occasional bicycle. Besides horses, introduced animals include water buffalo, cows, pigs, sheep, goats and various other creatures. Illustrations of Macassan sailors, European ship captains, buffalo hunters, missionaries, non-Aboriginal stockmen, station owners, women of European descent and Chinese miners were added to rock art sites in many parts of the country.

Today rock art is rarely made for as people were removed from traditional lands, introduced disease, killings and massacres took their toll, and Indigenous people were attracted to newly emerging settlements, rock art production tapered off. However, traditional rock art design elements continue to be made as part of bark paintings and with new media, from acrylic paintings on canvas to digital and multimedia depictions. These are made both for sale to tourists and to art galleries/serious art collectors, something that began in Arnhem Land in the late 1880s (Taçon and Davies, 2004). Importantly, however, in the 21st Century rock art sites are very rarely rejuvenated, either by touching up older pigment art, re-grooving engraved designs or by adding new pictures to rock art sites. Thus an accumulation of imagery and fresh design-making has ceased so that only the process of deterioration continues at rock art sites, resulting in a loss of balance and an increasing appearance of decline.

Threats to Australia's rock art

Australian rock art, like that of most countries, faces a wide range of natural and human threats (see Table 1). Natural threats, such as general weathering, water washing over surfaces, changes in exposure to sunlight, vegetation, deterioration of rock surfaces, damage by animals such as termites and mud wasps that build nests over rock art panels (and in Southeast Asia birds that build nests on top of rock art), and other forces are difficult, if not impossible, to fully protect against. Indeed, in this sense, rock art was not made to last forever. However, in the past rock art sites were renewed with new imagery in order to maintain cultural interactions with these important places and, in the process, to reaffirm individual and group and connections. But with changes brought about by colonisation by Europeans over the past couple hundred years this rarely happens today.

Table 1: Natural and cultural threats to Australian rock art, many of which are common to other parts of the world including Southeast Asia.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Natural impacts</th>
<th>Cultural impacts</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Water flow/rain (especially changes brought about by various forces)</td>
<td>Tourism (e.g. touching, unmanaged visitation, too much visitation)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dust and wind</td>
<td>Rubbish</td>
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<tr>
<td>Fire and smoke</td>
<td>Unwanted visitation to non-tourist sites</td>
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<tr>
<td>Flaking/cracking/ disintegration of rock surface</td>
<td>Creation of new roads/tracks</td>
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<tr>
<td>Structural collapse</td>
<td>Graffiti (e.g. kids, frustrated teenagers, ignorant adults)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Vegetation growth/rubbing</td>
<td>Theft (removal of art and/or other cultural material)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lichen/algal growth</td>
<td>Industrial and other development (e.g. mining, agriculture, dams, housing, roads, etc. leading to site damage/destruction)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mineralisation (salt/calcification)</td>
<td>Researchers undertaking rock art recordings, rock art dating and analysis, archaeological excavations, etc. in less than best practice ways</td>
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<td>Insects (e.g. termites, mud wasps) and animals (e.g. birds making nest or worms, kangaroos, etc., digging and lying in rock shelters)</td>
<td>Well meaning rock art conservation specialists (e.g. poorly installed drip lines)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Direct sunlight (often caused by changes in vegetation)</td>
<td>Introduced feral animals such as pigs rubbing low lying paintings off shelter walls and digging, lying in rock shelters</td>
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Indigenous Australians are most interested in dealing with impacts derived by human interaction with places (such as development, introduced feral animals, road dust, rubbish, unauthorised visitation, graffiti, vandalism and so on; Figs. 8 and 9) than the natural impacts that have always impacted sites and are harder to control (water wash,
exfoliation, mineralisation and the like) (Marshall and Taçon (in press)). This is because these are the biggest developing threats that are increasing at a rapid pace and because cultural heritage strategies, if developed, fully financed and implemented, can effectively address these impacts.

Indeed, much of this priceless heritage is under threat because we do not have state, territory or federal government rock art conservation and management strategies. Furthermore, there are few management plans in place even for individual sites. Although various forms of legislation make it an offence to disturb a rock art site this has not stopped a rise in graffiti, vandalism and damage from development. Now unprecedented mining exploration across the country further threatens this priceless cultural resource. Traditional owners struggle to protect their heritage with very few conservation/management plans in place and little government assistance.

On 31 May 2011, a campaign to protect Australia’s rock art was launched by myself, Australia’s first Chair in Rock Art Research, and well-known actor Jack Thompson. It has two objectives. The first is to raise awareness about the importance of and threats to Australia’s rock art, and global rock art more generally. The second is to encourage financial support from philanthropists, business leaders and government to help establish Australia’s first national rock art institute in collaboration with Indigenous communities.

Although in Australia there is no central rock art register, a national rock art institute would establish one in collaboration with Indigenous communities. Access to site locations and different forms of information would vary according to Indigenous community wishes and would be designed to maximise site protection while at the same time not restricting access for legitimate research, conservation and management purposes. Existing databases could be revamped, fleshed out and linked, as well as combined with new digital rock art recording programmes.
The national rock art institute would also compile an initial list of the nation's top 100 sites. These would then be recorded using state of the art technology such as laser scanning for 3D replications. Then if anything happened to the sites we would at least have these detailed records available for future generations. Three dimensional digital records could also be used to provide virtual access to sites via museum/art gallery exhibitions and online; virtual reality walk throughs would be possible. Internet sites that already embrace rock art, such as The Google Art Project (http://www.googleartproject.com/collection/australian-rock-art/), could be used to provide other forms of virtual rock art access to large and diverse global audiences. Laser scans every few years at important sites could be included but they also would help with site monitoring for conservation purposes.

Since the launch of the Protect Australia’s Spirit (http://www.protectaustraliaspirit.com.au) campaign there has been 24 months of widespread, overwhelmingly positive rock art media attention (as of May 2013). Aboriginal people across Australia have congratulated us for taking a stand on this important issue and hundreds of people from across the nation have emailed or phoned their thanks and various offers of assistance. Some members of the public have also donated small amounts of money to the cause. But philanthropists, business leaders and government officials have been slow to respond, especially in comparison to their response to the protection of contemporary art. For instance, millions of dollars, raised from private donors, governments and businesses, is spent by art galleries across Australia each year on the purchase of single paintings and other works of art. Billions is spent looking after their collections in secure buildings. In comparison hardly anything is spent researching and looking after rock art. And, embarrassingly, the 2012 Australian Heritage Strategy Public Consultation Paper (http://www.environment.gov.au/heritage/strategy/submissions.html) reads as if rock art does not exist in Australia at all.

As noted above, rock art was never meant to last forever and it has always been subject to natural weathering forces. But it is the rapid increase in human induced impacts that is most worrying. This is similar to climate change. There has always been natural climate change. What worries many people is human induced climate change that it changing the planet in profound ways. Human activity is also changing rock art sites in unprecedented ways.

Rock art is particularly under threat in northern Australia where there is a federal, state and territory push for development – especially mining, agriculture and tourism, all of which will have huge impacts on landscapes, rock art sites and cultural heritage more generally.

For instance, in the Quinkan country of Cape York – one of the most impressive and extraordinary bodies of rock art in Australia – outstanding heritage values are threatened by unmanaged tourism and potential mining development (Cole and Buhrich, 2012). In 2011 and 2012, permits for minerals and coal exploration were granted for virtually the whole of the famous Laura-Quinkan rock art region despite it being listed as an environmentally sensitive area on the Queensland Cultural Heritage Register. Traditional owners struggle to protect their heritage with no conservation/management plan in place and no government assistance, as the nation learned from the front page of Australia's national newspaper, The Australian, on 2 March 2013.

The rock art of north Queensland is as rich as that of the Top End of the Northern Territory and the Kimberley of Western Australia. In the Northern Territory, Kakadu National Park received World Heritage status partly because of its rock art and there have long been management plans in place. Since 2011, a new up-to-date programme has been implemented. But outside of the Park rock art sites do not have the same protection. For instance, there currently is
no conservation and management plan for the exceptional rock art sites of the Wellington Range in northwest Arnhem Land yet large international mining companies such as Cameco and Rio Tinto have discovered significant deposits of uranium, bauxite and other minerals in and around the Range.

Initiatives toward the development of a national rock art strategy

In order to develop a comprehensive strategy of relevance to both Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians a number of important steps need to be undertaken:

1. Hold workshops to hear what Indigenous Australians regard as the priorities for future rock art research, conservation and management.

Rock art was made by Indigenous Australians and despite some of it being very old it remains a part of living Indigenous culture. Indigenous Australians are very concerned about threats to their rock art and conserving both tangible and intangible aspects of sites for future generations. They desire to work with interested parties to achieve this. Traditional owners struggle to protect their heritage with no conservation/management plans in place and little to no government assistance. Thus it is imperative that a national rock art heritage strategy involve Indigenous Australians from the beginning.

2. Conduct a national inventory of the state of the resource.

This has never been undertaken before. We do not have an overview of Australia’s rock art let alone specific threats to it. We also do not have a good idea of our knowledge gaps or even which areas should be prioritised for research, conservation or management. Existing databases need to be identified, analysed and reconciled. A conservation assessment process would be created in conjunction with this and for ongoing field based research.

3. Review national, state and territory rock art policies, management practices and funding schemes.

Heritage policies and management practices vary considerably across Australia and there are no comprehensive policies, funding schemes or plans for rock art. The current National Australian Heritage Strategy Public Consultation Paper doesn’t even mention rock art. This is a shocking omission and a review of Australian government approaches to rock art is long overdue.

4. Identify the top 100 Australian rock art site-complexes for intense future recording and management.

Across the world nations are identifying their top rock art sites for UNESCO World Heritage listing. Australia has no sites on the serial rock art list and currently it cannot even be stated what the top sites are. Meanwhile some of the most outstanding rock art site complexes are subjected to growing threats, including mismanagement and lack of government interest. Initially, the top 50 site complexes could be recorded using state of the art technology such as laser scanning for 3D replications. Then if anything happened to the sites we would at least have these detailed records available for future generations. This initial set of detailed recordings could later be expanded to incorporate the next 50 site complexes and a refined recording and storage system could be developed.

5. Visit all rock art sites currently open to the general public in Australia and Southeast Asia to assess what is working and what is not working.

The general public is very interested in rock art and worldwide rock art is an important part of tourism. In Australia, numerous sites have been made accessible to the public, with various forms of infrastructure and variable management plans (Fig. 10). A range of problems have been identified, such as wooden boardwalks making rock art vulnerable to destructive bush fires, but a national assessment
of what is working and what is not working at public sites has never been undertaken. In many cases, sites may be at risk because of visitation. Comparison to how sites are run in Southeast Asia will be invaluable in terms of learning how local communities are involved, what sorts of sustainable strategies are employed, how tight budgets are managed and so forth.

6. Undertake rock art management case studies that could become part of a national heritage model, both large and small and from a range of locations: e.g. commencing with Cape York (Queensland) and the Wellington Range (Northern Territory).

Case studies from a range of locations and environments will allow us to not only better manage the rock art of those areas but also provide us with alternative models to plug into a national rock art heritage strategy. This is important because of the range of different forms of rock art and their landscape locations as well as significant threats to sites differing between some areas.

7. Develop rock art conservation and management training schemes, new database systems, innovative ways of using 3D and other new technology as well as other programmes to establish best rock art research, management and conservation practice.

Australia has very few rock art conservators and rock art managers rarely have rock art specific training. New technology, including the latest GIS systems and gigapan/panoramic/photogrammatic cameras, provides opportunities for developing innovative forms of rock art recording, conservation and management. Three dimensional digital records could be used for detailed recording and to provide virtual access to sites via museum/art gallery exhibitions and online; virtual reality walk throughs would be possible. Laser scans every few years at important sites would help with site monitoring for conservation purposes. Ways in which training and technology can be used as part of a national rock art strategy need to be explored so that Australia will
become a world leader in this field and always be at the cutting edge of best practice.

8. Develop new initiatives between PERAHU, RARC and CRARM in order to establish a truly national rock art heritage strategy.

Partly in response to a 2008 a Sydney Morning Herald editorial by myself, calling for the establishment of an Australian rock art research centre, three new institutions were created: ANU’s Rock Art Research Centre (RARC; 2009), UWA’s Centre for Rock Art Research and Management (CRARM; 2010) and Griffith’s Place, Evolution and Rock Art Heritage Unit (PERAHU; 2011). PERAHU is already collaborating closely with RARC to develop new iPad and tablet based rock art recording and database systems, joint research and student exchanges. Geographically both PERAHU and RARC are national in scope but focus on northern Australia. PERAHU also includes Southeast Asia in its orbit. CRARM, with a focus on Western Australia, recently received significant multi-million dollar funding, allowing it to hire a range of new staff and to develop new research programmes in the Pilbara and Kimberley. There is now the opportunity to collaborate between all of the centres in order to develop a truly national approach to Australian rock art.

The eight initiatives outlined above do not just apply to Australia. Similar undertakings could take place in Sarawak, across Malaysia, throughout Southeast Asia and in many other parts of the world in order to ensure the rock art of these areas also can continue to inform and be enjoyed by present and future generations.

Summary And Conclusion

Across Australia today rock art sites are still extremely important for Indigenous Australians. They are an important part of the heritage of all Australians as well as having World Heritage value. Five hundred centuries of art production led to untold riches. What remains today is mostly from the past 150 centuries, much of it less than 10,000 years of age. But it tells an incredible and unparalleled story of long-term human survival in a constantly changing natural-cultural-spiritual world. Australia’s first art was born of and in the land, something that has also affected Australian art ever since.

Australia’s rock art is as powerful and significant as that of France, Spain, South Africa, India or China. Financial and logistical support for a major initiative is needed now to conserve this special part of Australian and world heritage for future generations.

Rock art was never meant to last forever and it has always been subject to natural weathering forces. However, it is the rapid increase in human induced impacts that is most worrying. Although various forms of legislation make it an offence to disturb a rock art site this has not stopped a rise in graffiti, vandalism and damage from development. Now unprecedented mining exploration across the country further threatens this priceless cultural resource.

Unlike many countries Australia does not have national, state or territory rock art heritage strategies. In May 2012, Botswana’s environment minister, Kitso Mokaila, implored government departments, the private sector and local communities to work together to preserve his country’s rock art sites for future use. Why can’t the same happen in Australia? Australia’s rock art heritage is as great as all its sporting achievements on the world stage combined together yet much of it is neglected, undocumented and destroyed. These rock art museums, situated in natural settings but also cultural landscapes of great significance, need as much protection as our built museums. But because so much needs to be done perhaps each year we should not only celebrate International Museum Day with new projects and initiatives but also a new International Rock Art Day!
Acknowledgments

Traditional Aboriginal Owners of rock art sites I have worked at since 1981 are thanked for their hospitality, generosity and sharing of knowledge. They have always been great teachers interested in passing on the history, spirituality and cultural experience associated with rock art sites to future generations. Most recently, Ronald Lamilami of the Namindjbul Estate of the Wellington Range, northwest Arnhem Land, Northern Territory has been a true inspiration in this sense. Without Ronald and all of the other Aboriginal Australians I have worked with this article would not have been possible. Griffith University is thanked for supporting my rock art research and leading a campaign to safeguard its future. Director Ipoi Datun, assistant curator Mohd Sherman Saufi and other staff of The Sarawak Museum are thanked for their interest and support of rock art conservation that made this publication possible.

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