

Chains of connection

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Essay: Chains of connection

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Across northern and central Australia there are special places recognised as sacred sites with varying degrees of restriction and sacredness. Archaeological and ethnographic investigations suggest some may have been considered unusual, important and powerful parts of landscapes for at least a few hundred years, others for many thousands.

Today, Australians of diverse backgrounds and overseas tourists, as well as indigenous peoples, respond to these natural and cultural locations with a range of feelings from awe to beauty, from enlightenment to bewilderment. In the past, some of these locations were used for initiation, others for teaching. Some sites were places where “increase” ceremonies were conducted in order that various species of plants or animals could thrive.

At particularly powerful locations, senior men or women could tap into the power of the ancestral past in order to influence the present and future. Many sites are locations where Ancestral Beings are said to have transformed the land with long-lasting, startling effects. Others are their final resting spots or places where they entered stone, earth or water. Some localities are marked with rock art, stone arrangements, scars on trees or temporary earthen sculptures, but many are not. Not all rock-art sites are sacred sites but at many locations there might be paintings with various levels of meaning, including depictions of Ancestral Beings themselves. In the far north, sacred sites include big old banyan trees. Elsewhere, other trees or plant communities are also sacred, their destruction bringing great catastrophe in the form of storms and floods.

In the traditional past, all of these places were cared for by way of food, hunting and visitation restrictions, special ceremonies, songs, conversations with ancestors and other practical and ritual customs. Today, many of these places are also protected with state or territory legislation, national parks acts, World Heritage rulings and a range of access barriers. Although well intended, such legislation does have some negative consequences. One of these is an increasing distrust of oral history by some segments of the community, especially those interested in development. Another is the sectioning off of sacred sites from Dreaming Tracks and the larger landscapes they are inextricably linked to.

The connections between sacred sites are often difficult for non-Aboriginal Australians to grasp. Indeed, until recently, these have been routinely dismissed or at least considered not significant. One of the reasons is because of the amount of land such connections affect. Another is the difficulty of managing such large and diverse landscapes that cross park, state, territory and other contemporary political boundaries.

The European-Australian and contemporary Western world's approach is one that focuses on dividing the universe into discrete units for management and study, with connections and relationships examined later. The Aboriginal approach is generally from the opposite direction, focusing on relationships and connections first. Thus landscapes are viewed from a broad historical perspective first, with areas of interest or speciality within noted next. It is very important in this context to explain the connections between places, whether they be stone quarries, places of food resources, sites to be avoided or whatever, in order to more fully understand them. This understanding can be crucial for survival, especially in times of increased environmental or political change.

It is believed many sacred sites exert influences that radiate out from their central features. Thus, Aboriginal people would argue that not only the specific features need protection but also large areas of land around the sites. Influence and potential harm for indiscretion decrease as one moves away from sites but particularly powerful ones will exert their force over considerable distance, for example the "sickness" country associated with Bula sites in southern Kakadu. Other sites are connected by lengthy Dreaming Tracks that run across great stretches of country. For instance, in the Keep River region of the Northern Territory, one of the more important sacred sites is a Rainbow Serpent Dreaming location associated with the black-headed python. It is an area abundant in rock art and near the most significant geological expression of the site is the largest art site of the area. Paintings, drawings and engravings of many ages can be found and it is obvious this was an important meeting, camping and teaching place for a long period of time, at least 18,000 years, according to archaeological excavation. Traditional owners and custodians contend the track begins to the north, in an area that is now part of the Timor Sea. It heads south, then east across the Victoria River before continuing south and east across the border into Queensland.

In Queensland's Boodjamulla National Park, near the Riversleigh World Heritage Area, there is an art site with an enormous depiction of a Rainbow Serpent, high up on the escarpment face. Waanyi elders contended the creature had stopped here, making its image when it entered into the rock. According to them, it had travelled a long way, from beyond the Victoria River in the Northern Territory. Further investigations revealed it was the same Rainbow Serpent associated with sites near Keep River, with the two locations marking two of its most important manifestations along an extensive Dreaming Track. The country in between linked widely separated groups of people as well as

establishing distant relationships that could bring neighbours together for ceremony, exchange and in times of need.

Another Rainbow Serpent is said to have travelled down from Cape York and the Queensland Gulf country to near Riversleigh. Dingo Dreaming Tracks connect the Waanyi and other tribes with people of central Australia. West of Alice Springs, Native Cat Dreaming Tracks link people of that area to groups north to and beyond the Victoria River. Throughout Kakadu, Arnhem Land and North Queensland there are crisscrossing tracks associated with a wide array of Beings, while across the Kimberley of Western Australia the travels of Wandjinas are most notable.

If we were to plot all of these tracks, a number of fascinating details would become apparent. First of all, we would see that many correspond with traditional seasonal travel routes and that some also correspond with modern roads and highways. Second, we would see a strong correlation between sacred sites associated with Ancestral Beings and Dreaming Tracks. We would also find correspondence between Dreaming Tracks and meeting places, some types of rock art and some forms of stone arrangement. Finally, we would observe links to places of geo-diversity and biodiversity.

We would have a map that was social, historical, geological, biological, ecological and archaeological at the same time. Within it, we would see communities of people existing in large “provinces” as well as others living at junctions, with influences from several directions at once or changing influences over time. Keep River and Riversleigh-Boodjamulla are junctions in this sense, while the Kimberley, Arnhem Land and Cape York are more like provinces. Central Australia is another province, one that people moved in and out of with the changing climate and resource availability.

After visiting central and northern Australia, Bruce Chatwin explored Aboriginal concepts of mapping in his 1987 classic *The Songlines* (Jonathan Cape). Although he focused on the musical and rhythmic aspects of mapping great stretches of country, through both shared and exclusive songs, the fuller story is more one of great narrative and oral history. This narrative focuses on the travels, encounters, actions and inactions of powerful Ancestral Beings in the earliest eras of the Dreamtime, a period of great change, creation and destruction. The routes across Australia that these beings defined through their journeying became Dreaming Tracks, Chatwin’s “Songlines”, that continue to connect distant groups of Aborigines today.

Before the recent era of European-induced change, creation and destruction, these tracks were maintained through ceremony, song, visual art, the transmission of oral history, trade and other forms of exchange. Today, these tracks illustrate ways of conceptualising land other than through the printed maps, roads and hard political

boundaries so typical of the modern world. This way of connecting is not just a northern phenomenon, it is also something long practised in the south. However, European colonisation impacted differently in the south so that details of indigenous traditions were quickly lost. The result has been a global fascination with the traditions of Aborigines of the north and centre combined with a marginalisation and denial of tradition in the south.

One of the significant traditions of great interest for the outside world is known in English as the Dreamtime or Dreaming. These terms loosely refer to a very complex belief system that incorporates history, narrative, traditional practice, innovation, individual experience and religion in a way that is centred on land and landscape. Each Aboriginal linguistic group has its own term for the Dreamtime and the details vary between groups. However, one of the common themes is that of connections and relationships: to other groups of people, other creatures, land, the past and the Ancestral Beings that created all of this. There has been much written about the Dreamtime by white Australians, and heated arguments as to its nature, but essentially it is a religious and philosophical approach to behaviour and conduct. It defines the law and lore for Aboriginal Australians, allowing them to survive in both harsh natural and political environments.

A common misconception among non-Aboriginal Australians is that the Dreamtime ended some time ago (often because of contact with Europeans). For most Aborigines, the Dreamtime continues to express itself, albeit in new ways. However, the Dreamtime was never static; change has always been an essential feature. Changing landscapes, seas and climate resulted in transformations of Ancestral Beings, plants, animals and even people.

Learning to accept, cope with and perhaps control change is one of the many lessons/laws, implicit and explicit, in most Dreamtime stories. Another misconception is that there was only one era of Dreamtime. In fact, there were many eras, although their number and nature vary across the country. It was in the earliest eras that Ancestral Beings were most active, shaping and forming the world out of nothingness, forging trails and tracks and creating other creatures. In northern Australia, Aborigines often say this was the time of the “first people”, the *Nayuyungi* of Kakadu and other parts of western Arnhem Land.

Across Australia, the *Nayuyungi* and other first people established the chains of connections and webs of relationship essential for Aboriginal survival. They created Aborigines, with some of them later transforming into other creatures. They taught them languages, about different foods, particular ceremonies, certain songs and societal laws. In a general sense, stories about the Ancestral Beings have their origins in the deep past

and the first people to arrive in Australia, at least 45,000 to 60,000 years ago, “created” the continent for subsequent generations through their travels, discoveries, marking and mapping. However, much detail relates to the past few hundred or few thousand years and, particularly, changes that began 4000 to 6000 years ago. It was during this period that major changes in stone-tool kits, rock art and language occurred, climate changed and landscapes were transformed by the final rise in sea levels. Importantly, one of the most important Ancestral Beings appears in rock art for the first time as well - the all-powerful Rainbow Serpent.

Rainbow Serpent depictions, and presumably associated ceremony, song, belief and practice, soon spread out of their origin sites in northern Kakadu and western Arnhem Land, forging great Dreaming Tracks to the south-east, south-west and down into the centre of the continent. This was likely part of a process of exchange that had been going on for thousands of years, but Aboriginal populations waxed and waned in various areas because of aridity in those areas. For instance, we can see evidence of people moving in and out of central Australia from genetics, linguistic studies, archaeological excavation, physical anthropology and the mapping of different forms and styles of rock art.

Movement was not just north-south but occurred in all directions. However, the full extent of connections between northern and southern Australia has not been as well articulated as it has for the north, east and west. Furthermore, because of the rapid changes to Aboriginal populations and cultures across south-eastern Australia in the late 1700s and early 1800s, the articulation, expression and maintenance of many north-south connections were quickly lost. In other cases it was not revealed to outsiders, especially in terms of Ancestral Beings, because of fear of persecution from church, mission and government authorities. As a consequence, contemporary oral history about Ancestral Beings, sacred sites and Dreaming Tracks in south-east Australia is often treated with suspicion, as some native-title claims, development applications and other judgements have highlighted. Some national park organisations have only very recently grasped these concepts and, in many ways, are lagging behind their northern counterparts in terms of protecting non-archaeological cultural sites, co-management of areas and so forth.

Recent work in the Blue Mountains World Heritage Area, however, has revealed that fragile land-knowledge networks still exist across the greater Blue Mountains Aboriginal community and that areas such as Wollemi National Park are not strictly natural wilderness. Indeed, ongoing work by archaeologists, anthropologists, the Aboriginal community and bushwalkers has shown not only is the Wollemi a rich cultural landscape but also that there have long been connections between this region and different groups of Aboriginal people from local areas to the west, east, south and north

and also from much further away.

Routes across the Wollemi are emerging from rock-art and other site-location data while the imagery and oral history suggest paths are associated with major Dreamtime Beings such as the Eagle Ancestor. Rock-art evidence also helps define major links through great stretches of country, suggesting there must once have been Dreaming Tracks across south-east Australia as significant and detailed as those of the north and centre. Some of these correspond with areas of high biodiversity and geo-diversity. This has implications for our perceptions and conceptions of people of the south, the management of cultural heritage and the ways in which we view southern landscapes. For instance, although there have long been linguistic and other differences between the peoples of northern and southern Australia, I believe it is valid to use the detailed Dreaming Track landscape model of the north to reinterpret cultural landscapes of the south. The challenge is to do this in a reliable manner using archaeological (especially rock-art), geological, ethno-historical and contemporary oral-history indicators.

It is important to do this for many reasons. Besides social-justice and cultural-heritage implications, such an exercise can help all of us view southern landscapes in new ways. Instead of seeing the south-east just as a patchwork of parcels of land, cities, towns, farms, parks, industrial estates, residences, quarter-acre blocks and so forth, separated by concepts of ownership and demarcation - titles, deeds, fences, roads and modern political boundaries - we will begin to see the longstanding relationships between places and the chains of connection that affect all of them.

This could lead to alternative ways of conserving ecosystems and biodiversity but may also help change attitudes of isolation that currently separate people from the effects of their daily lives. If this were to occur, we might be able to manage landscapes and environmental problems in more co-ordinated ways, leading to a better Australia for our children. In the long run, the adoption of this approach by southerners would also help all of us appreciate and manage northern landscapes in new ways, as the north would no longer be seen as “foreign” or different.

New chains of connection can and will be established, the Alice Springs to Darwin rail line being a recent mechanical example and one purposely designed to divert around Aboriginal sacred sites. Perhaps people of the cities could also be encouraged to follow not only Dreaming Tracks but water, food and other resource links across the country in order to better understand and realise their place within the Australian continent. Cities and suburbs can be great meeting places and melting pots, with the Gold Coast a striking example. But in order for them to become truly meaningful places within larger regions, their inhabitants have to grow new roots and connections that extend beyond city boundaries.

History and archaeology have repeatedly shown that cultures that fail to maintain

sustainable connections to large stretches of land do so at their folly. Perhaps if we focused less on computer superhighways and paid more attention to looking after the diversity found along Dreaming Tracks, water courses and resource routes, our own survival would be less threatened. ■

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