



Listen to the Land

Luke Keogh

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Pastoralists in the Willandra Lakes Region
World Heritage Area, 1981-2003

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Introduction

In late October 1981, the pastoralist Des Wakefield got his daily dose of news from the *Sunraysia Daily*. He lived on Turlee Station, in far south-western New South Wales, about two hours drive north-east of Mildura. He was surprised to read in the local paper that his property, along with that of many of his neighbours in the region, had just been proclaimed a World Heritage Area. He phoned his brother Harold Wakefield, who lived not far away at Top Hut Station, to inform him of the news. He then phoned his friend Digger Richardson at Garnpang Station and told him the same news.

Slowly the 20 landholders in the region, by word of mouth or reading the local newspapers, learnt that they had just become part of the Willandra Lakes Region World Heritage Area. They had many questions. What was World Heritage? Could they continue to run sheep? Would they have to leave? These questions took nearly two decades to answer. *Listen to the Land* tells the story of that search for answers.

The Willandra is a wide and epic landscape filled with saltbush, sand dunes and mallee scrub. Leaving Mildura after passing over the Murray River into New South Wales, the drive into the “back blocks” as they were once called to describe their location beyond the Murray and the Darling rivers, is two hours on rough dirt road. Arriving in the Willandra, it is outback Australia at its dustiest and most distant. Concealed beneath the mirage of sand and saltbush is a landscape millions of years in the making.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, the Willandra shot to prominence when Jim Bowler encountered the intact remains of two ancient Aboriginal burials, these were named Mungo I (Mungo Lady) and Mungo III (Mungo Man). They were dated to about 40,000 years old. They are the oldest human remains discovered in Australia and a unique record of human antiquity outside Africa. Mungo Lady is still the oldest site of ritual cremation yet recorded anywhere in the world. The find fundamentally changed perceived understanding of the human occupation of Australia. And it was evidence of the deep spiritual layers covering the Willandra Lakes region.

In April 1994, more than a decade after World Heritage listing, a delegation from the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) visited the region on behalf of the World Heritage Committee. They reported, “Willandra has been the most neglected of all Australia’s World Heritage sites and urgently needs attention.” As State and Commonwealth governments struggled to come up with a plan of management, people like the Wakefield’s on Turlee and Top Hut, the Richardson’s at Garnpang, and all others in the region, could only wait.

Listen to the Land is the story of pastoralists in the Willandra Lakes Region World Heritage Area. It tells of their struggle to understand World Heritage and the many years they waited to see what would happen to their pastoral properties. It is a forgotten episode in the history of the region and in the history of World Heritage. The 20 pastoralists lived through a lot over that period, but they also had a big impact upon the World Heritage process as it is practiced in Australia. As described in Chapter 4, some places never pursued World Heritage after what happened in the Willandra. The episode serves as a lesson for stakeholders, policy makers and governments about the broad-scale impact of rushed decisions made without a thorough stakeholder engagement process.

The Willandra is a site of profound importance to Aboriginal Australians. This report, however, is solely focussed on pastoralists’ experiences resolving the conflicts over the World Heritage area. Although both the pastoralists and the Three Tribal Groups, the Paakantji, Ngyiampaa and Mutthi Mutthi, supported each other throughout the difficult times between 1981 and 2003 (briefly discussed in Chapter 3), the limited scope defined by the project brief does not allow for a discussion of the experiences of Aboriginal people in this process. The experiences of the Three Tribal Groups also deserves closer attention and there is potential to do this in a future study. As an introduction, readers are encouraged to start with the documentary *Message from Mungo* (Ronin Films, 2016) and The Mungo Project a work in progress by the Western Heritage Group.

This report proceeds in four parts. Chapter One “Back Blocks on the World Stage” describes the reasons for listing the Willandra as a World Heritage Area and gives a brief pastoral history of the region. Chapter Two “Waiting” describes the long decade following its listing until the early 1990s when pastoralists waited for a plan of management. Chapter Three “Lives on the Line” details the dramatic moments between 1992 and 1995 when relationships in the Willandra were at their most difficult. Chapter Four “Wisdom of Community” details the moments when a plan of management finally arrived and the individual property plans were completed. The final part also details how the eventual plans were largely successful for pastoralists in the region.

As this is living history, within the last three decades, the report has been compiled by using both archival sources and oral histories. The primary sources are interviews with 11 pastoralists and public servants encompassing 20 hours of interviews with these stakeholders. Unless otherwise footnoted, quotations in this report are taken from oral history interviews conducted between February and April 2018. This has been buttressed with extensive research into historical newspapers and official reports.

Listen to the Land is very different to other government reports—it is a story. There are not policy recommendations or facts and figures to be found in this report. Communities, like the Willandra, are often drawn together for a shared love of place and a way of life. People remember life’s moments as a series of episodes that they recount as stories. Today, the oral tradition of communicating stories with our neighbours and friends continues to flourish in spite of a rapidly changing technological world. Compiling and recounting stories also has a value to help the Willandra region reflect on its past and prepare for the future. Most apparent in this story is that listening to the community was a fundamental part of finally achieving positive outcomes for the region.

Timeline

1968

Mungo Lady found near Walls of China on what is now Mungo National Park.
Flurry of scientific research conducted over the next two decades.

1974

Mungo Man found on what is now Mungo National Park.

1979

Mungo National Park formed.

1981

Willandra Lakes Region World Heritage Area listed on the World Heritage List.

1984

First meeting of the Willandra Lakes Region World Heritage Area Consultative Committee (June).
Findings of the Joint Parliamentary Select Committee to enquire into the Western Division recommends Mungo National Park be expanded to include all WLRWHA.
Zanci Station becomes part of Mungo NP.

1985

Pre-stamped envelopes issued by Australia Post showing Australian World Heritage properties.
Cropping licenses revoked for lessees inside the WLRWHA.

1987

Peter Clark's Archaeological Survey published.

1991

Wool price collapses as the reserve price scheme collapses.

1992

Final meeting of the WLRWHA Consultative Committee.
First draft plan of management prepared by Fatchen Associates, soon after abandoned.
Old Garnpang Homestead relocated to Mildura Botanical Gardens.

1993

Mulurulu Station sells, one of the first since listing (July).
First meeting of the WLRWHA Community Management Council.

1994

First meeting to the WLRWHA TSAC (February).
IUCN visit Willandra and highlight major management issues in the region (April).
Aboriginal representatives finally join WLRWHA CMC (30 June).

1995

Workshop on the WLRWHA Plan of Management at Mungo Lodge (June).
Revision of WLRWHA boundary reduced to 240,000 hectares (December).

1996

Sustaining the Willandra: The Willandra Lakes Region World Heritage Property Plan of Management finally published.
First round of IPPs completed.

1997

Structural Adjustment Packages finalised.
Garnpang, Leaghur, Pan Ban and Balmoral become part of Mungo NP.

2003

Largest known fossilised human trackway in the world discovered at the edge of Lake Garnpang.

List of Acronyms

CMC	Community Management Council
IUCN	International Union for Conservation of Nature
NSWNPWS	NSW South Wales National Parks and Wildlife Service
TSAC	Technical Scientific Advisory Committee
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
WLRWHA	Willandra Lakes Region World Heritage Area

Chapter 1

Back Blocks on the World Stage



On 26 October 1981, the Willandra Lakes Region was officially accepted onto the World Heritage List as a site of both natural and cultural significance. The Willandra, along with the Great Barrier Reef and Kakadu National Park, were the first three Australian sites to make it onto the world list. They joined sites of global significance, including Mount Everest, the pyramids in Egypt and the Mayan ruins in Honduras. Having these Australian sites recognised by the international heritage community was a source of great pride for the nation.

The World Heritage mission seeks to encourage the identification, protection and preservation of cultural and natural heritage around the world that is considered of outstanding value to humanity. It commenced in 1972, when the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) adopted the international treaty called the *Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage*. In August 1974, Australia ratified the convention, which meant that as a contracting party to the convention they recognised that they have responsibility at an international level for the cultural and natural properties within their jurisdiction. Today there are 1073 properties on the world list; in 1981 there was only 110.

The Willandra announcement came at the World Heritage Committee meeting held in Sydney. It was the first time the World Heritage Committee had ever been to Australia. So important was it that the Prime Minister Malcolm Fraser opened the meeting. He told delegates that world heritage was “a profound expression of co-operation between people and a willingness to share”¹. Australia had been part of the World Heritage process since the beginning. They had a delegate at the first World Heritage Committee meeting in Paris in 1977 and had been represented at every meeting since. The meeting in Sydney saw the Australian, Professor Ralph Slatyer, elected chairman of the Committee. He spoke enthusiastically of the inclusion of the three Australian sites, “the international recognition they will now be accorded should help not only to ensure their protection, but will also add immeasurably to the international fund of scientific and education knowledge.”²

Significantly, in 1981 when Willandra was added to the list the World Heritage Committee made a special recommendation. “The Committee would like to see a management plan rapidly established for the whole area.”³ Of the 26 sites accepted into the list at the 1981 session it was one of only two where the Committee made such a recommendation, the other was the Niokolo-Koba National Park in Senegal. In 1981, a plan of management for the Willandra was an important step in preserving its heritage.

The Willandra

The Willandra Lakes region is unique and deserved to be on the World Heritage list. Plans to put it on the list were afoot as early as 1980. It was put on the list for both its natural *and* cultural values; it was rare for sites to be listed for both values.

In 1981, the Willandra Lakes Region covered 3700 square kilometres in far south western New South Wales. It is a unique ancient Pleistocene lake bed that formed over the last 2 million years. The lakes are now dry and edged by lunettes—crescent shaped dunes formed by winds sweeping across the flat lake beds. There are five large dry lake beds and 14 smaller beds that vary in size from 6 to 350 square kilometres. About 20,000 years ago, with no more water filling into the system, they began to dry up. The last lake dried about 13,000 years ago. What was left beneath thousands of years of sediments was a preserved Pleistocene landscape. Today it is a series of large and small vegetated dry lake beds that are surrounded by dunes and kept in place by thick mallee growth.

¹ UNESCO, 1981, p.2.

² Anon., 1981, p.1.

³ UNESCO, 1981, p.4.

Willandra Lakes Region World Heritage Area

Statement of Significance, 1980

The Willandra Lakes Region World Heritage Region was inscribed onto World Heritage List for both outstanding natural and cultural values.

Natural Criterion

- as an outstanding example representing the major stages in earth's evolutionary history; in this instance the Late Pleistocene.
- as an outstanding example representing ongoing geological processes.

Cultural Criterion

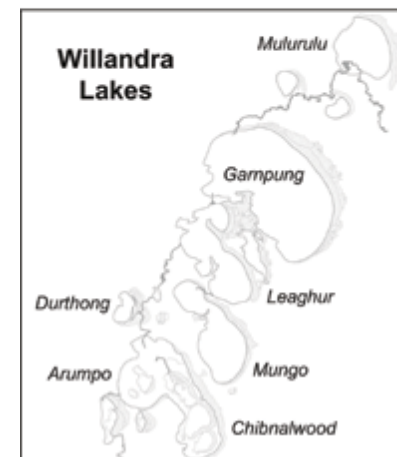
- bearing an exceptional testimony to a past civilisation.
- *“The Willandra discoveries have established the great antiquity and richness of Aboriginal culture and have caused significant reassessment of Aboriginal prehistory and its place in the history of modern man. The discoveries have linked the origins of modern society in the Old World with one across Wallace’s Line in Australia.”*

Compiled from, *Nomination of the Willandra Lake Region for inclusion in the World Heritage List* (Australian Heritage Commission, December 1980).

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Location map, Willandra Lakes World Heritage Area.

page 11: The full moon rises while the sun sets at the Walls of China, Mungo National park. Photo by Donald Yip, Shutterstock



One feature of the region is the “Walls of China”, a series of lunettes on the south-eastern edge of the lake that evoke an almost lunar landscape. Erosion wears down the layers of sediments. If a traveller's eye was good enough they could read the sediments of 50,000 years of earth history in the protruding lunettes. Even before listing and the recovery of Mungo Lady, so unique was the region that a tour company with buses and scenic flights operated in the area.

In 1968, the unique geology revealed Willandra's most treasured offering. The geologist Jim Bowler was working on a project searching for lake basins that might preserve records of earth's history. At the suggestion of J.N. Jennings who had noticed how unique the Willandra was when on a flight from Broken Hill to Sydney, Bowler travelled to the area. In January, he investigated the Walls of China and was able to develop a good knowledge of the region's environmental history dating back 50,000 years. On 5 July 1968, while working on Mungo Station, Bowler recorded a deposit of “burnt carbonate-encrusted bones within the Mungo unit” (as he later told fellow researcher, John Magee). It was Mungo 1—widely known as Mungo Lady. She was dated to 40,000 years old. It is still the oldest evidence of ritual cremation on the planet. A few years later, in 1974, Bowler found another skeleton, this time a man who had ochre spread on his body after burial. This was also dated to approximately 40,000 years old.

Over the 1970s there was an intense phase of archaeological research in the region. Here were sites that contained critical evidence about the development of modern humans that was of global significance. The historians Malcolm Allbrook and Ann McGrath described the region: “since 1968, the lands of the Willandra changed from being conceived as sparsely populated, semi-arid, marginal sheep station country, to a veritable trove of geological and cultural significance.”⁴ In the 1980 submission for listing, the region was described as “standing in the same relation to the global documentation of the culture of early *Homo sapiens* as the Olduvai Gorge relates to hominid origins.”⁵ It was a significant and unique heritage site worthy of protection





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Images of Gol Gol homestead owned by Robert Patterson, c1880. Courtesy University of Melbourne Archives.

Back Blocks

When scientists first worked in the Willandra they gave the lakes that made up the region the names of the stations where they were located: Lake Garnpang, Lake Mulurulu, Lake Mungo and Prungle Lakes. They also gave the geological layers of the region similar names: the Arumpo unit, the Mungo unit and the Zanci unit.

As the archaeologist Peter Clark wrote in 1985: “The Willandra is unique in that it is the only World Heritage Area in Australia that encompasses land which is actively exploited by rural enterprise”⁶.

In the early years there was rarely conflict between scientists and pastoralists. For decades, archaeologists found new discoveries while working with the pastoralists who had a knowledge of the land from running their sheep stations. As one pastoralist describes it, “It was just impossible to go out as a paid archaeologist looking for the stuff. We stumbled across it when we were looking for sheep. That’s because we were out there all the time.”

The Willandra region stations were referred to as the “back blocks” because they were at the back of the more plentiful Darling River country. The Willandra region was first taken up by European pastoralists in the early nineteenth century following on the heels of the first white explorers to the region. In the 1850s as pastoral settlement spread to the western divisions of New South Wales large stations formed in the Willandra. It has always been a dry region and in the early years the runs that survived were controlled by wealthy owners who could rotate stock between more plentiful blocks near the Darling and outer blocks in the Willandra.

⁴ Albrook and McGrath, 2013, p.241.

⁵ Australian Heritage Commission, 1980b, p.3.

⁶ Clarke, 1985, p.1.

List of landholders and their properties who became part of the Willandra Lakes World Heritage Area when it was announced in 1981.

- B.C. and J. Ablett, Pan Ban
- A.W. and D.J. Barnes, Joulni
- C.C. and H.M. Barnes, Chibnalwood
- C.L. and G.M. Barnes, Leaghur
- K. and T. Byrnes, Wamberra
- R.E. and R.M. Clothier, Gol Gol
- P. Curren, Prungle
- D.W. Garraway and Son, Spring Hill
- B.R. and S.A. Gorman, Koolaman
- G.J. and R. Griffith, Baymore
- H.W. Leslie and Sons, Gulthul
- T.C. and E.L. Musgrove, Balmoral
- Estate of W. Parker, Mulurulu
- D.J. and J.M. Richardson, Banoon and Marma
- R.A. Richardson and Son, (later T. and M. Richardson), Garnpang
- K.W. and M.I. Sue, Arumpo
- P.W. Sutton, Benenong
- D.T. and D.P. Wakefield, Turlee
- H.F. Wakefield (later I. Wakefield), Top Hut

Note: As the years passed some stations passed into different ownership reducing the number of landholders to 17. This also changed when the boundaries of the Willandra were changed in 1996.

Officially, the first block taken up in the region was Turlee in 1850. This was quickly followed by others in the 1850s and 1860s: Boomiaricool (now Prungle), Gol Gol, Pan Ban, Mulurulu, Arumpo and Garnpang. These were very large stations. Gol Gol, one of the largest and most well known from the time, was more than 203,000 acres and at any one time could have as many as 50,000 sheep.

Other than the inevitable drought, flood and rabbit infestation, three very important land tenure arrangements defined the region. In 1861 the Robertson Land Act in New South Wales sought to give land to newly arriving migrants by carving out smaller parcels from large tracts taken by squatters. The Act required new selectors to live on their land for at least three years and make improvements. This Act had moderate success but paved the way for the 1884 Crown Lands Act. This Act divided New South Wales into three divisions on the principle that not all land was of equal value: east, central and western. The Willandra fell into the western division, which meant that it was Crown Land—leasehold land. This act was followed by the Western Lands Act of 1901 that set up the Western Lands Board (later Commission) to look after lands in the Western Division but also brought in the 40 year lease system.

The next major change was the Returned Soldiers Settlement Act of 1916, which gave returned soldiers the opportunity to take up crown land if they had been honourably discharged. This had a wide impact in the Willandra. Large stations like Gol Gol were carved up into smaller portions. Mungo station and Baymore station were two such soldier settlement blocks.

Still with all this legislative change the land stayed the same dry and endless plain. One traveller for the *Sydney Morning Herald* described the region in 1908, "It is the widest country of all ... Rain and wind have made all its landmarks. The scars of rainfall are all over it—just because rain washes it about wholesale."⁷ Erosion was a defining feature of the landscape.

When Jim Bowler began fieldwork in the late 1960s he set up camp on Gol Gol station, although by this time it was much smaller than in the nineteenth century. According to the boundaries of the original listing there were 20 landholders who had their stations drawn in to the area (see list of stations adjacent page), some of these were older stations that had been in families since the nineteenth century, and some of them were former soldier settler blocks. Over the years with buying and selling the number would go down to 17.

As the archaeologist Peter Clarke explained in his study of the region, “European landuse has become an integral part of the local environment over the past 130 years. The region’s archaeology has been exposed by the erosion caused by overgrazing (sheep and rabbits) during the past periods of severe drought, particularly in the late 19th century and in the 1940s. It can be argued that the cumulative effects of pastoral land use over the past 100 years played a significant role in the area attaining World Heritage status. Without erosion there would not have been the discovery of Mungo skeletons or substantial areas of Pleistocene archaeological material.”⁸

In 1978, in light of the significance of the area, New South Wales National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS) bought Mungo Station off Albert and Venda Barnes and by the following year Mungo National Park was dedicated. Even as a National Park was set up in the area landholders had no idea that the whole area was under consideration. After helping many researchers find things in the area, pastoralists thought that if anything significant was found it would simply be a matter of zoning. As one pastoralist described the early 1980s: “We always thought that if anything was found they would put a little fence around it, which we were all happy with ... a meter or two fence around it would be fine. But once the listing came in that put the fear of death in some of the landholders.”

⁷ Anon., 1908, p.2.

⁸ Clarke, 1986, p3

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The World Heritage emblem a symbol of the global protection for the heritage of humankind. The emblem, designed by Belgian artist Michel Olyff, was adopted in 1978.



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This postage stamp, from 1995, is one of many stamps the Willandra has appeared on. It was first put on a stamp in 1985. From Author’s Collection.

Chapter 2

Waiting

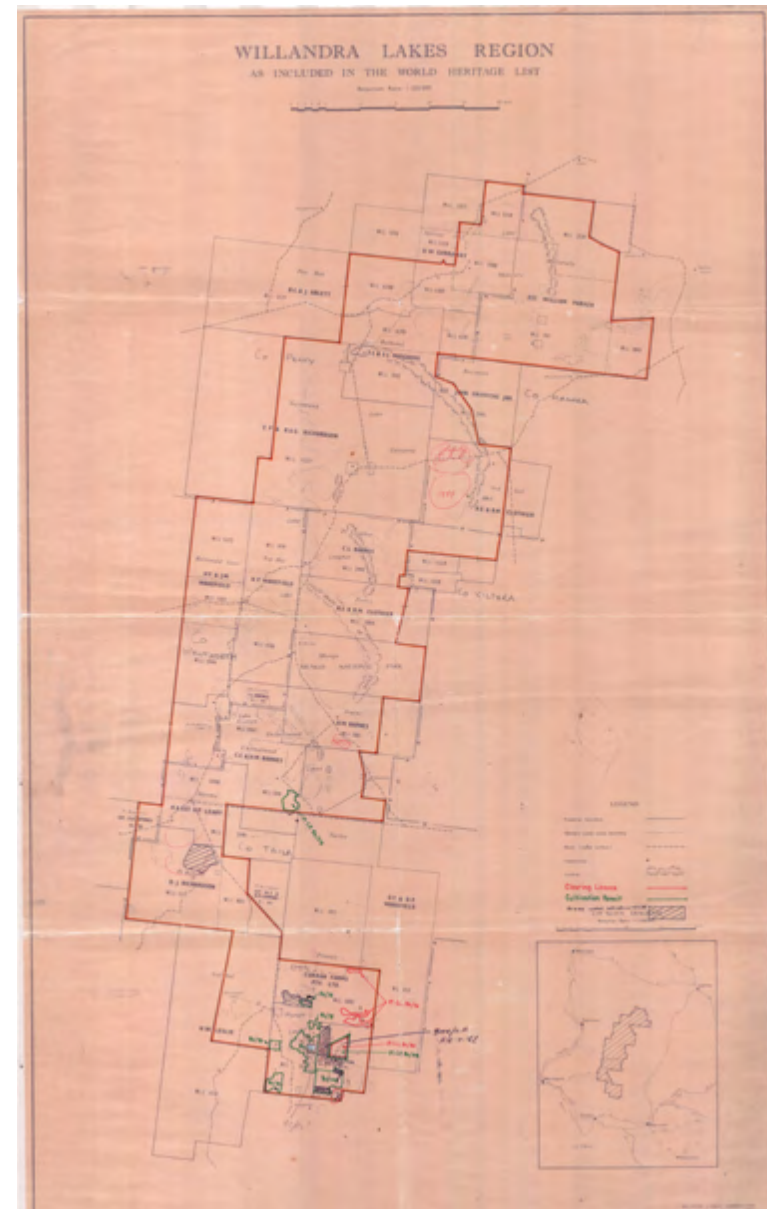


Twelve years is a long time. Within twelve years a ewe has past her useful date and is taken from the flock; within twelve years a child passes through adolescence to become an adult; within twelve years the lines on a farmer's face will become deeper and more visible. In 1981, when the Willandra was first listed, UNESCO asked for a management plan to be “rapidly established”. For twelve years following its listing efforts towards a plan of management stagnated. For pastoralists in the Willandra, twelve years was a long time to wait.

Ask pastoralists who lived through that decade what is needed at the start of a journey towards World Heritage and chances are they will also talk about a plan of management., “That’s where the big mistake was made at the start,” says Des Wakefield former owner of Turlee Station, “There was no plan of management. And I would say to anyone now, if they were looking like becoming a World Heritage, object to it until you’ve got a plan of management. Otherwise it’s just a waste of time.” (Unless otherwise footnoted, quotations in this report are taken from oral history interviews conducted between February and April 2018.)

A plan of management articulates how an area will be managed and details what are the key practices that need to be enacted to safeguard the region’s heritage values. In short, it provides the vision of where all stakeholders are going to and it details the path that every one is going to walk together. In another way, as one pastoralist described it, “Once you got your plan of management in place you got an idea of whether you are viable or not.” That is why it was so important to pastoralists that such a plan was in place.

Stakeholders is a word used to classify interest groups—in the Willandra there were many. The pastoralists were but one of the many interest groups. There was also the Three Tribal groups the Paakantji, Ngyiampaa and Mutthi Mutthi. There was the Commonwealth Government that were the responsible signatories to the UN’s convention on world heritage. There was Western Lands Commission who were responsible for the western division. There was the New South Wales



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Map of the Willandra Lakes Region World Heritage Area, c1982. Hand-drawn additions by Western Lands Department drawn when cropping licenses were being assessed. Courtesy WLRWHA Archives.

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Image of Mungo Woolshed moved to Zanci Station, 1980. Note the caption to the image. From Nomination of the Willandra Lake Region for inclusion in the World Heritage List (Australian Heritage Commission, December 1980).

page 19: After a long journey from the Western districts, camels wait for their wool to be unloaded at Wentworth, NSW, 1918. Collection of the State Library of South Australia.



20.

Part of the Mungo woolshed, re-erected at Zanci Station. These adaptive techniques by European pioneers came 40,000 years after people had adapted to the aquatic resources of Lake Mungo.

Government that also had responsibility for the region. There was New South Wales National Parks and Wildlife Service, who had acquired Mungo station in 1978 and at the time of listing owned 4.2% of the region. There were scientists that conducted pioneering research in the area. There were conservation groups who wanted the region preserved. There were local shires, Balranald and Wentworth, that had portions in the area. These were the groups that had a key interest in the Willandra.

Unifying all of these stakeholders toward the goal of world heritage was no easy task. At the same time landholders had stations to run, sheep to shear and families to feed.

Willandra Lakes Landholders Protection Group

In 1984, the Willandra Lakes Region World Heritage Consultative Committee was established to steer the region toward a plan of management. Their first meeting was held on 14 June 1984 at the Grand Hotel in Mildura and was attended by representatives from most groups (notably absent was representative from the Commonwealth). Representing the landholders was Brian Ablett from Pan Ban Station. By the following year they also had Peter Curren from Prungle Station representing their interests. As the decade wore on, more and more pastoralists began to take part in the meetings.

In the same year that the Consultative Committee commenced, a New South Wales Parliament investigation into western lands handed down the *Report of the Joint Select Committee Enquiry into the Western Division* (1984). It gave special attention to the Willandra. Their recommendation was that the boundaries of Mungo National Park be extended to take in the entire Willandra Lakes region. All 3700 square kilometres of it. Such an action would have removed all pastoral holdings from the region. The proposal was opposed by the Willandra Consultative Committee, but it was a warning to landholders that their future in the area was uncertain.

Such an extreme position increased the anxiety among landholders. In 1984, in response to the Joint Select Committee Enquiry the 20 landholders in the area got together to form the Willandra Lakes Landholders Protection Group. They had two goals: protection of the area and protection of the interests of landholders. Ted Richardson from Garnpang was elected secretary and Brendon Gorman from Koolamon was President. Soon after Peter Curren became President, and together with Richardson, steered the Group through to 1997. There were 20 landholders in the area, some were more affected than others because they only had small areas of their properties in the heritage area. As one landholder describes it, “The ones most involved were the ones most impacted.”

By organising themselves pastoralists were able to have a unified voice in the process toward a plan of management. Reading through the hundreds of pages of minutes from the Consultative Committee two things are noticeable. There was always a representative from the Group at the meetings—this allowed the perspective of the Group to be regularly voiced. And if an issue needed a joint decision it would then be referred back to the Group. From the outset, they were organised and effective in communicating their needs and concerns.

Studying the Lakes

It was not that nothing was done between 1981 and 1992, it is just that it took so long. The major achievement in this period was a series of studies of the region. These studies were completed through a 1983 agreement between Western Lands Commission and the NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service that opened funding and administrative support for the studies. There were environmental studies conducted into erosion, fauna, geomorphology, sediments and vegetation. There were other studies into archaeology, Aboriginal knowledge and requirements of the land, tourism, feral and native grazing and into European cultural history. These reports were expected to be finished by 1985 but took much longer.

Completed between 1984 and 1989 they provided the knowledge base for a management plan to be developed.

Of all the reports that were produced in the 1980s, the major study was Peter Clark’s *Archaeological Resource Study* (1987) which ran to more than 800 pages and took four years to complete. Clark was a thorough and widely liked archaeologist who engaged the entire community in his research. Many landholders ranked Clark as not just a good scientist but also a friend. In the report Clark notes,

Many of the landholders in the Willandra Lakes region have contributed to the scientific investigation which has taken place in the Willandra over the past 19 years. They have allowed researchers free access to sites on their properties, and many have actually guided researchers to areas which they thought might be of interest. Researchers were also often given the use of shearing quarters for accommodation during fieldwork.⁹

As active participants in the research process, pastoralists also wanted to become part of the management process. In 1987, many of the landholders wanted to be supplied with location maps of key sites so that could keep vehicles and livestock clear of the sites. Although they were keen to help, Clark also reported that landholders were in fear that their leases may be terminated or made into a national park.

Bread on the Table

Throughout this period pastoralists still had to make a living. The only thing to do, as Ian Wakefield from Top Hut station reflected, “you kept going as you were and wondered what was going to happen next”. These were not easy times on the land. Every pastoralist knows that tomorrow is another day closer to the next drought. The early 1980s were years of devastating drought. The latter half of the

decade were good years and things were moving along well. But then in 1991 the price fell out of the bottom of wool when the reserve price scheme collapsed. Life on the land was always challenging.

In 1990, in light of the important stewardship of pastoralists in the region, the *Sydney Morning Herald* ran a page 2 article evocatively titled, “Alex, the Unofficial and Unpaid Minder of Mungo”. While State and Commonwealth governments were taking time to finalize a plan of management the *Sydney Morning Herald* aptly told its Sydney readers that Alex Barnes on Joulni Station adjacent to Mungo National Park, “no longer manages just several thousand head of sheep, but a stream of visitors as well. Some get a guided tour, while others are told that sampling the relics is not the right idea.”¹⁰

With so much time being taken to form a management plan there was also great challenges facing the Willandra. Pastoralists were called upon to look after the area, either by showing people around or warning people off. An increasing number of tourists travelled to the area, and the *Sydney Morning Herald* reported, “vast numbers of fossils have been removed from Lake Mungo, prompting scientists to declare the lack of funds given over to management as a national disgrace.” It was at this time that New South Wales government changed legislation so that consultative committees, just like the one set up in the Willandra in 1984, had statutory power and access to policymakers.

⁹ Clark, 1987, p.188.

¹⁰ This quote and the next, Quiddington, 1990, p.2



Woolshed in the Willandra. Photo Leanne Mitchell, WLRWHA.



Fences into the distance in the Willandra. Photo Leanne Mitchell, WLWHA;



Open road in the Willandra, 2018. Photo by author



The Consultative Committee met 14 times between 1984 and 1992. Throughout much of the 1980s, pastoralists felt that things were moving too slowly. As one pastoralist said of the Committee, “It wasn’t reporting to anyone—meaning it wasn’t going anywhere.” In the 1990s things, however did start to move. A number of public servants from various departments invested heavily in trying to find a resolution. And with new legislation consultative committees had greater input into the policy process.

Finally at the 1992 meeting, after many years of work, there was a Draft Plan of Management which had been prepared by the consultant Dr Tim Fatchen. There were two key recommendations from the 250 page report. First, that the Willandra Lakes World Heritage Region Management Authority be created; second, that the Consultative Committee end and that the Willandra Lakes World Heritage Region Consultative Council commence. The latter would be made up of community and stakeholder groups and would give the voice of community.

The final Consultative Committee meeting was held at Mungo Lodge on 13–14 April 1992. It was attended by all affected landholders in the area—30 people from 20 stations. It showed their combined unity and their impassioned search for a resolution more than a decade after listing. It was a testament to the high hopes that they had on finally having a draft plan of management. But the process was set to falter, again.

After the meeting there was good and bad news. The first recommendation for a management authority was largely not pursued. The recommendation of a consultative council was a valuable one. Two councils were created that reported back to both State and Commonwealth policy makers. They were the Community Management Council (CMC) and a little later the Technical Scientific Advisory Committee (TSAC). Although the first draft plan of management must have appeared largely a failure, it was an important first firm step toward a resolution. But it took another year before any of these committees met. Still pastoralists waited.

One of the pressing questions for pastoralists was what would happen if they wanted to sell their land? In July 1993, Mulurulu Station went up for sale. Many people thought there might not be any interest. Surprisingly, there were a number of bidders. Richard Williams, a young first time buyer from South Australia, purchased the property. It had always been his dream to own a sheep station. As the sale price almost reached the reserve, many people saw this as a good sign for the region. But as Williams remembers, “it was a very opportune buy”. It was walk in, walk out, and there even cattle that could be sold in the first year. He goes on, “but I was punting on things working out with the World Heritage”. There were two results from the Mulurulu sale. On the one hand it partially resolved the concern that pastoralists had regarding market interest in their properties; but on the other hand it showed that without a plan of management there was still a cloud over the potential of the region.

When the Community Management Council finally met on 23 July 1993, just like over much of the 1980s, the talking and meetings just continued. By the 1990s there was an energetic interest from policy makers keen to enact change. Ross O’Shea worked at the Western Lands Commission from 1990 to 1997 and was an important broker in this transition phase. As he describes it:

We knew it was going to cost money, we knew it would require government to get on board, we knew there was a journey government had to go along to get there. We knew that the landholders were getting more and more agitated and edgy about the whole thing and with a great amount of justification in my view. ... We knew that the Aboriginal people wanted to see outcomes. We also knew that there was a building dichotomy between the thinking of the scientists and the Aboriginal people ... We knew that bridges needed to be built there because that actually had implications for the Commonwealth Government under its obligations to World Heritage values. There was a lot of project management that went into managing the people and government on the journey to a resolution.

Chapter 3

Lives on the Line



If you spent nearly two decades wondering about the future of the land you lived on it would start to take a toll. Ted Richardson was the secretary of the Willandra Lakes Landholders Protection Group; he wrote most of the letters and was a key organizer for the group. Richardson said of that long decade: “As the years rolled on, I spent more and more time defending my turf than living my life and enjoying it”. As it took time to formalize a plan of management people still had to live their lives. Richardson and his wife Mary-Anne owned Garnpang Station. Decades on, his passion for Garnpang is still present: “You just loved the place. Some years you have the money, some years you don’t. But you just get by.”

A third generation farmer, Richardson’s grandfather took up the property in 1911. His father, Raymond “Digger” Richardson, built the house and erected all of the windmills that still stand out there today. Digger knew the country well—he helped the archaeologist Mike McIntyre find sites on Garnpang in the 1970s. By the time Ted bought out his uncle in 1981, the property was 176,000 acres: “100,000 acres without a tree on it, another 70,000 acres that is that thick you can’t open a pocket knife in it”. Large portions of Garnpang covered dried beds of Lake Garnpang and Lake Leaghur; the remainder was thick mallee country.

Like much of the region the great challenge was water. Originally there were a few brackish bores. In 1992, Richardson took a big financial risk and sunk a deep bore. It struck artesian water and “made the place”. In the early 1990s, Richardson’s passion and optimism for the land was still evident. Not only was he a smart farmer, he was articulate and thorough. As the secretary for the Protection Group he wrote letters to ministers and government officials and newspapers about their plight.

There were two important points that pastoralists argued for. First, they wanted certainty about the future and management of the region. They wanted to know what land needed to be protected, how to do this and how to manage their pastoral stations in light of these restrictions. They also wanted compensation for loss in value of their properties, loss of cropping permits and the hardship that

more than a decade of tenure-uncertainty had created. The latter were to be assessed through a socio-economic study. At the third meeting of the Community Management Council on 22 November 1993, Richardson asked if stress would be taken into account when conducting the study. Uncertainty builds and plays on your mind.

Lake Garnpang is a profound place, even by Willandra standards. As more intense research was conducted over the region, Garnpang’s significance only increased. At one meeting in 1991, Doug Pearson, the Western Lands Commissioner, already noted the issues for Garnpang and felt that the Consultative Committee needed to alert the lessee “as quickly as possible” about the issues related to viability. On Garnpang, the areas to be locked up for heritage values encompassed the woolshed, the homestead and many watering points. While these issues of viability could be raised, without an effective plan of management or a socio-economic study completed, Richardson was forced to proceed with his work of running his station. As Richardson said of the times,

That was the worst thing. In business there is someone making decisions. The problem with governments and bureaucrats is there is no decision makers. Ministers are thinking about the next election and bureaucrats are thinking about the next promotion. It was horrendous. It took a toll on people.

In the 1980s, the dried bed of Lake Garnpang revealed that fifty thousand years ago, on the kidney shaped cape at the south-western edge of the lake, hundreds of Aboriginal people lived a relatively abundant life eating freshwater mussels and native mammals. Accepting that some of the most significant heritage values of the Willandra are the discoveries of ancient burial remains, then looking station by station, as Peter Clark did in his 1987 archaeological study, we see that although Mungo Lady and Mungo Man were found on Joulni Station, the real epicentre for locating ancient human remains was Garnpang Station.

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Ready to board plane to Birdsville, 1995. From left to right: Ian Wakefield, Mary-Anne Richardson, Ted Richardson, Daryl Richardson, boy is Michael Richardson. Image courtesy Julie Wakefield.

page 27: The Bog, 1923, by Reginald Sharpless. Wagons loaded with bales of wool, on the Cobb Highway stock route between Ivanhoe and Mossgiel, bogged after the Willandra Ck overflowed. Courtesy State Library of Victoria.



In 1980, Ross Hogan, one of the station workers on Garnpang, showed researchers the remains of a 40 year-old male, today labelled WLH-50. At the time, leading paleoanthropologist Alan Thorne claimed it to be the most important human fossil discovery made in Australia. Debate still rages among scientists over how to classify WLH-50, but its discovery has helped scientists rewrite the “out of Africa” theory of evolution. In Peter Clark’s 1987 archaeological study of the entire region he showed that the top three most significant locations for burials were Garnpang with 57, Joulni with 11, Mungo National Park with 9 and Top Hut with 9. Later research would take the number of burial sites on Garnpang to 70, which is a substantial number considering that in total there have been about 106 individuals found. And there were not just burials, there were hearths, stone tools and trackways. Garnpang’s was certainly of international heritage significance—there was no place like it on earth.

“The Most Neglected”

In April 1994, having heard reports of issues in the Willandra, the World Heritage Bureau (an elect subcommittee of the World Heritage Advisory Committee which meets every year to coordinate the work of the committee) had their representative Dr Jim Thorsell from the IUCN travel to the Willandra to make an assessment. The IUCN described the situation in the Willandra: “It has long been known that there have been some problems with landowners resident in the site, that Aboriginal concerns were being raised and that no management plan was available 13 years after it was requested by the Committee.”¹¹

Thorsell met with the Three Tribal Groups, pastoralists and government officials. He was optimistic that solutions would materialise in the next 6 to 8 months, but scathing in his assessment. “The conclusion of the two day visit ... was that Willandra has been the most neglected of all Australia’s World Heritage sites and urgently needs attention.”¹²

Willandra Lakes Region World Heritage Area Conservation Status Report *extract*, IUCN, 1994

Several Important Lessons from the Willandra Lakes Experience.

- Private landowner resident in a site should always be consulted when preparing nominations;
- Boundaries should be carefully determined to include only those areas with World Heritage values;
- Advisory bodies should always undertake field inspections, especially on nominations where problems are anticipated;
- 13 years is too long a time lapse for monitoring such sites but the conduct of a monitoring action can serve to initiate action.

Taken from IUCN, *Monitoring the State of Conservation of Natural World Heritage Properties* 30 June 1994, pp.15-16,

Available <https://whc.unesco.org/en/documents/683>

¹¹ IUCN, 1994, p.15.

¹² *ibid.*

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Sun setting on world heritage area.

Photo Leanne Mitchell, WLRWHA.



The IUCN reported to the World Heritage Bureau that it was Australia's "forgotten" World Heritage site. The brief visit also prompted them to think that this was only of cultural significance not natural significance (a point later opposed by the TSAC). The IUCN went on in their report to outline "several important lessons". The lessons still resonate today as lessons to be learned from the Willandra and to take to future World Heritage sites. The report of the IUCN added fuel to the already burning unrest in the Willandra.

Surprisingly, when the first CMC was held on 23 July 1993 there was no membership from the Three Tribal Groups—no representation from the Paakantji, Ngyiampaa and Mutthi Mutthi. They did not join the CMC until the sixth meeting on 30 June 1994. Throughout many years of challenge there was a mutual support between Aboriginal owners and pastoralists. A support for each others problems and needs unified the two groups from the days of the Consultative Committee and this continued into the 1990s. Michael Ockwell worked for many years in the NSW Lands Department and served for over a decade as the Chairman of both the CMC and TSAC. He described the relationship between the two groups.

I always think back on this with fondness. It was absolutely wonderful how tangible it was the relationship between the pastoralists and the Indigenous elders. It was quite remarkable that as things started to improve for pastoralists, they became very strong advocates for and of the elders. It was quite terrific and something I will never forget.

Line in the Sand

In the early 1990s, as Ian Wakefield from Top Hut Station remembers, he attended the 68 meetings in two years. More than a meeting every fortnight. Wakefield was not alone, this was the experience of many pastoralists. They were willing to put their station life on hold to have their voice heard, consistently heard.



➤ One of the many events the Willandra Lakes Landholders Protection Group attended, the Flying Doctor Ball, Broken Hill, c1995.

➔ Ian Wakefield inspecting the wool clip at Top Hut. Photo Leanne Mitchell, WLRWHA.



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Inside the woolshed at Mungo, 2018. The woolshed was made of cypress pine by Chinese workers, and is one of the most significant heritage buildings in the region. Photo by author.

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The old Garnpang homestead, now located at Mildura Botanic Gardens. Photo Dan Rosendahl



People wanted to see a plan of management, they wanted to plan for the future. In 1992, they thought a solution was imminent but the only thing that came out was just talk. But they held their resolve and remained committed to finding a resolution. All the while there was hope. As Garry Griffiths from Baymore notes of the challenging times, “We just hoped that when they put a plan together that it was workable.” But putting that plan together was taking a long time. A very long time.

In December 1994, a Ministerial Council was scheduled to be held at Mungo. This was the moment. People really thought that things were set to change. Everything was in place. There was the CMC and TSAC in effective operation; the scathing report from the IUCN made it an issue for concern to the Commonwealth under their World Heritage obligations; there was also a consultancy firm contracted to draw up yet another plan of management; the socio-economic study was completed and it was clear that a socio-economic adjustment package was necessary. There were even resolutions passed by the CMC earlier in the year, which merely needed ministerial approval. People were hopeful that change was coming.

Sometimes the best plans do not always work out.

On 22 December 1994 the Ministerial Council was held at Mungo Lodge. On a Seaview operated King Air plane, government officials were specially flown in to Mungo Lodge. Among the passengers was the Commonwealth Minister for Environment, Sport and Territories John Faulkner, NSW Minister for Environment Chris Hartcher and NSW Minister for Lands and Water Conservation George Souris. There was also their entourage—ministerial advisors and public servants from each department. Discussions did not go well. As one member present reflected, there was an unwillingness from government officials to commit to the resolutions that the CMC had passed months before. The ministers from Commonwealth and State thought they could pass back and forth between each other without making a commitment. It was apparent to many present that no

resolution was going to come out. “The meeting got pretty ugly”, one person present observed.

At days end still no commitment had been made by ministers. Late in the day on 22 December, as one pastoralist remembers, “At that stage we had been sitting and hoping and waiting and working towards a resolution and it soon dawned on us that it was getting nowhere ... they [the ministers] were preparing for a lovely Christmas and would leave us in the lurch again”. Ministers and public servants concluded the meeting and made towards the plane. They piled on and buckled the seatbelts. The door was locked, the pilot took his place and started the engines.

As the King Air engines roared to life, a man wearing boots and well worn jeans walked out on to the runway and laid down in front of the plane. It was Ted Richardson. The plane stopped. Then his young son ran out onto the runway and laid next to his father. Then Greg Lawson, an Aboriginal man, representing the Aboriginal groups went out and blocked the plane’s path too. Together they sat in protest.

Watching on, people were frightened. Ted’s wife broke down. Onlookers were equally shocked. People on the plane were unsure. A young clerk on the plane was in her first weeks of employment with the government and was shocked.

One witness described the incident, “it was terrible ... it was awful”. Desperate times, desperate measures.

Richardson, told reporters after the incident, “We just wanted to hold them up for 15 minutes because they’ve been holding us up for 14 years.” Pastoralists in the Willandra had waited more than a decade and still they did not know what was going to happen to their stations. It was life and death. Instead of shutting down the engine, the pilot broke all aviation rules and put on the reverse thrusters and backed-up the plane. Richardson still remembers the deafening roar of those engines. The plane went around the protesters and flew into the distance. The incident was page one news in the national papers.¹³

Ian Wakefield, owner of Top Hut station, remembers, “it was not until that meeting when Ted stepped in front of the plane that things started to change ... that was the pivotal moment, because after that there was action ... after that they come to realize we were fair dinkum and they needed to do something about it.” The plane incident was a symbolic moment for many pastoralists in the region. Slowly the human cost of stagnation was apparent in that one moment. The long wait had had an enormous impact upon Richardson and his family, he says: “It’s such a long period of time. You only work from when you are 20 until you are 65 and these people had taken 20 years out of your life.”

In 1995, slowly things started to change. There was a preparedness from governments on all sides to find a solution and to offer funding to resolve the deadlock. But it still took time.

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Falling down sheds in the Willandra. Photo Leanne Mitchell, WLRWHA.



¹³ Grose, 1995, p.1.

Chapter 4

Wisdom of Community



After fourteen years of struggle, the Willandra pastoralists were uniquely positioned to advise other regions about their experiences of World Heritage. After the first Australian listings in 1981, other regions were granted World Heritage status—including the Sydney Opera House, Shark Bay, Fraser Island, and the Wet Tropics of North Queensland. One location that was discussed for nomination was the Lake Eyre Basin. With its mix of National Parks, pastoral stations and mining operations, its multi-use nature made it very similar to the Willandra, although on a much bigger scale. The entire Lake Eyre Basin covers nearly one-sixth of the Australian continent, an issue here would have impacts across the entire continent. In June 1995, Ted Richardson, Mary-Anne Richardson, Daryl Richardson and Ian Wakefield travelled to Birdsville to discuss their experiences of World Heritage.

“It got to the stage where it had happened to us, but improve your protocols for the future so it doesn’t happen again”, says Richardson of those times travelling and lecturing. Ultimately, the Lake Eyre Basin was never nominated. Many farmers in the Lake Eyre Basin feared a similar experience as the Willandra. *The Canberra Times* reported one farmer from the area saying, “What will happen to farmers? Will they suffer as the Willandra Lakes people have suffered for 12 [sic] years waiting for some form of management?”¹⁴

Others in the Willandra Lakes Landholders Protection Group, travelled to Sydney and Port Augusta and Far North Queensland to lecture on World Heritage. Over the years they became spokespeople on the impact of World Heritage upon their lives and an example of the need for thorough stakeholder engagement. Their experiences had a major impact on how World Heritage was practiced and achieved in Australia.

In 1995, TSAC investigated the boundary of the Willandra and recommended it be amended. Originally, in 1981 the World Heritage Area was run along cadastral boundaries. Many areas, such as large portions of thick mallee scrub, had made it into the area and were not of world heritage value. Based on TSAC’s advice,

in September 1995, the Commonwealth Government requested that the World Heritage Center amend the boundary of the Willandra. In December 1995 the recommendation was accepted. The Willandra Lakes Region World Heritage Area was reduced to 240,000 hectares, from its original 370,000 hectares. It was the first time a World Heritage area had been reduced in size. Ross O’Shea played an important role in the boundary issue. He remembers, “when that happened I know that the landholders really got on board that something was going to change.”

At around the same time as researchers were investigating the boundaries the community was brought together to find a workable plan of management. On 10–14 June 1995, after nearly fourteen years, a five-day workshop was held at Mungo Lodge. Everyone was there to decide on a plan of management. It was attended by all the affected pastoralists, representatives from the Three Traditional Groups, ministers and public servants from both Commonwealth, State and Local governments. Overseeing the process was Manidis Roberts Consulting. In the meantime the structural adjustment package had largely been approved and Individual Property Plans were about to commence.

The resulting publication, adopted and owned by the community, was titled *Sustaining the Willandra: The Willandra Lakes Region World Heritage Property Plan of Management* (1996). The report was largely conceived at this five day workshop in June 1995, it went through draft phases and community approval. Finally, in January 1996, they had a plan of management. With the plan they could move forward as a community. It was a significant moment. As Des Wakefield described, “everything settled down a lot when they got the management plan in place”.

¹⁴ McDonald 1995, p.2.

page 37: Russel Drysdale, Walls of China, 1945.
 Courtesy Art Gallery of New South Wales.
 Photo by Diana Panuccio, AGNSW.

Dollars and Sense

On 4 November 1996, the Commonwealth's House of Representative's Committee tabled the results of its investigation into World Heritage. The Committee commenced their investigation because they had received reports that there were deficiencies and inconsistencies in the management and funding of world heritage areas, "including a lack of consultation with people living near these areas". This was highlighted on visits to the Willandra. Their report titled *Managing Australia's World Heritage* provided many insights into the disparity between the management of Australia's then 11 world heritage sites. The report highlighted the need for proper stakeholder engagement and having a plan of management at the beginning of the journey.

If one of the obvious questions pressing people in the Willandra was why it had taken so long to form a resolution. Then one table in the Committee's report blatantly showed one of the big problems for the Willandra. Compared to other sites, especially Great Barrier Reef and Kakadu, it had received a shadow of the funding. At the enquiry, the NSW government was quick to point out that its world heritage areas had received "significantly less Commonwealth funding than those in other States". The Australian Conservation Foundation, submitted to the committee, that there was a "clear connection between the inadequate funding of the Willandra Lakes Region and the management failures there". One submission to the committee suggested that there was a hierarchy in heritage sites, ranked by the Commonwealth as one star sites and five star sites. Willandra, they said, was one-star and Great Barrier Reef was five star. Such a preferential system is clearly visible from the funding distribution, as outlined in Chapter 7 of the report (see table).

Even the committee noticed the huge toll it had taken on members of the community. "The most glaring failure by the Commonwealth to address the payment of compensation to people affected by world heritage listing is in the Willandra Lakes Region. Despite the Region's having been listed as long ago as 1981, funds for compensation were not made available until the 1996-97 Budget.

Location	Year of Listing	Level of Funding from listing to 1994/95
Willandra Lakes	1981	\$749,708
Great Barrier Reef	1981	\$132,182,238
Kakadu NP	1981, 1987, 1992	\$112,675,699
Lord Howe Island	1982	\$494,788
Tasmanian Wilderness	1982, 1989	\$48,046,358
CERRA	1986, 1994	\$1,420,000
Uluru-Kata Tjuta	1987, 1994	\$38,166,284
Wet Tropics	1988	\$26,000,000
Shark Bay	1991	\$1,956,608
Fraser Island	1992	\$300,700
Fossil Mammal Sites	1994	\$213,233

Funding for Australia's World Heritage Sites, 1981-1995. Extracted from Managing Australia's World Heritage (1995).

This situation has caused immense economic hardship and emotional stress to the landholders”.¹⁵ In another section of the report, the most recent round of community planning toward a management plan was seen as a step in the right direction. The then Executive Director of the NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service, Alastair Howard, aptly summed up the lesson from the Willandra.

The primary lesson is the consultation process at the very beginning. When an area has been identified or nominated for assessment for possible World Heritage listing ... the community consultation process and involvement of the community [should] start at that very point and continue, not in some sort of superficial way, but be very real and meaningful. What we have actually achieved in the last two years in the Willandra I think could be looked at as setting a model for that process.¹⁶

Listening to the People, Working the Land

By the end of 1996 the first round of Individual Property Plans had been completed. Arumpo, Banoon, Gol Gol, Mulurulu, Top Hut and Turlee had individual plans in place. The process of completing these station specific plans were of great benefit to landholders. Garry Griffiths from Baymore remembers well the consultants that helped them to create the IPPs had a lot of valuable knowledge, data and experience that helped them run their properties more sustainably. Ros Griffiths, who served as secretary to the Protection Group when Ted Richardson stepped down, notes that “it’s probably helped our management”. On other stations there was an equally good knowledge transfer. As Ian Wakefield reflected on the process, “they were the experts and they came in and helped us out.” Ian goes on, “in the long run we’re better off”. It’s just that it took so long to find the right solution.

¹⁵ House of Representatives, 1996, section 7.73.

¹⁶ House of Representatives, 1996, section 4.37.

Upon reflection many of the landholders that are now part of the World Heritage area are positive about the effect it has had on their properties and livelihoods. Ros Griffiths said, “being a world heritage property is probably one of the best things that has happened to us”. Des Wakefield reflected upon it in a different way. “The highlight is that we are much wiser ... if anyone came to me and said what do you need for world heritage, I would say get a management plan in place because you will muck around for a lot of years and get nowhere.” Another pastoralist reflected on the whole episode: “Back then everyone wanted to get out of the bloody thing. Now everyone wants to get into it.”

Today, the Willandra is one of the few World Heritage properties in the world where pastoralists are still running stock. This can only work with effective plans in place, both for the Willandra as a whole and at the individual property level. It is a complex arrangement but in the years after 1996 this has worked surprisingly well.

But it was not all happy conclusions. In 1997, the structural adjustment packages were finalized and some landholders either decided to leave or found their properties no longer workable and were bought out. Garnpang with its significant number of heritage sites was one of those properties—the homestead, the woolshed and many watering points all fell in areas of major heritage significance. While many stayed, some had to leave. Ted and Mary-Anne Richardson and their five children had to leave Garnpang. It is now part of Mungo National Park. Ted Richardson, reflects: “there is not a day that goes by that I don’t miss the hell out of that place ... I have no regrets now about getting out ... our kids have all gone on to do very well.”

As if to underscore Garnpang’s significance, in 2003 a fossilized trackway of human footprints were found on the edge of Lake Garnpang. Comprising more than 500 footprints, it is the largest of its kind anywhere in the world.



←
Garry and Ros Griffiths with
two of their grandchildren, 2018.
Photo by author

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Main sign at entrance
to Baymore Station. Photo
Leanne Mitchell, WLRWHA

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Woolshed in Bloom. Photo
Leanne Mitchell, WLRWHA

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Pastoral sign in the World Heritage
Area. Photo Leanne Mitchell, WLRWHA



After a plan of management was finally put together and adequate funding for the region was secured many things fell into place for the Willandra. It was not always easy times, but they had a plan and the community had a leading voice in orientating the future direction. Ross O'Shea who worked with Western Lands through 1990s and was heavily involved in the process noted that at the end of the day the success was driven by the community: "the wisdom of community is what's needed when you identify issues and develop outcomes ... the days of governments making decisions for community is long gone. We have to work with community in making our decisions." Ultimately the effective management of the Willandra was about listening to the community and listening to the people on the land.

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Willandra plan of management open to public comment. From the Canberra Times, 7 Oct. 1995, p.13.

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Poster, featuring Willandra Lakes Region World Heritage Area, 1995. Poster 47/1. Collection of the State Library of NSW.

Willandra Lakes Region World Heritage Property
CALL FOR SUBMISSIONS

A Draft Plan of Management has been prepared for the Willandra Lakes Region World Heritage Property. It will be available for public inspection until 3 November 1995 at the following locations:

WHERE	WHEN
PUBLIC EXHIBITION	
NSW Department of Land and Water Conservation Information Centre Ground Floor 23-33 Bridge Street Sydney NSW 2000	Until 3 November 1995 Mon-Fri 9 am - 4 pm
NSW National Parks & Wildlife Service Information Centre 1st Floor 43 Bridge Street Hornby NSW 2220	Until 3 November 1995 Mon-Fri 9 am - 4 pm
Commonwealth Department of the Environment, Sport and Territories The Library 3rd Floor Tobruk House, 15 Moore Street Canberra City ACT 2600	Until 3 November 1995 Mon-Fri 9 am - 4 pm
NSW Department of Land and Water Conservation Office 1 1 Silver City Highway Burrumbidgee NSW 2729	Until 3 November 1995 Mon-Fri 9 am - 4 pm
NSW National Parks & Wildlife Service Shop 1 & 2 Shopping Centre Start Highway Burrumbidgee NSW 2729	Until 3 November 1995 Mon-Fri 9 am - 4 pm
PUBLIC CONSULTATION	
For people seeking further information, staff will be in attendance to discuss the Draft Plan of Management at the following locations and times:	
NSW Department of Land and Water Conservation Office 1 1 Silver City Highway Burrumbidgee NSW 2729	20 October 1995 9 am - 4 pm
NSW Department of Land and Water Conservation East House Conference Room 4th Floor 23-33 Bridge Street Sydney NSW 2000	23 October 1995 9 am - 4 pm
Commonwealth Department of the Environment, Sport and Territories Conference Room 3rd Floor Tobruk House, 15 Moore Street Canberra City ACT 2600	24 October 1995 9 am - 4 pm

For further information, please contact Ian Heath on (02) 281 5199. Persons or organisations wishing to comment on the proposal are invited to make submissions by 3 November 1995 to:

Conclusion

Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has.

— Margaret Mead

For all the challenges of those times any pastoralist that you talk to agrees that the highlight was coming together as a community. “It brought us closer”, is a common phrase to hear when reflecting on those times. There were tennis days, fund raisers, and even “ripper parties”. But their united passion for the land and their place in managing it brought them together and made them an effective voice throughout 14 years of turmoil. Sometimes, as the famous Margaret Mead quote goes, a small united group of individuals can make a big difference. In the Willandra Lakes Region World Heritage Area a small group of pastoralists had a huge impact on how the area is managed and this spread to practices in World Heritage sites across Australia.

Some of the pastoralists described it in their own ways. Ian Wakefield said, “we could have been gone if we hadn’t of fought it.” And in a different way his uncle Des Wakefield said about why he protected it, it was not just for Turlee, the station he owned, “I like all land” he said. Farmers have a deep connection to the land. Garry Griffiths from Baymore put it another way, “when you have been on the land for three or five generations, you are a greenie in your own right because we are still here.”

The struggle of pastoralists in the Willandra served as a lesson for many people about what not to do when going about World Heritage listing. Today, it is largely a forgotten episode in Australian political and environmental history.

Of all the questions, one still resonates: why did it take so long? It took nearly fourteen years from 1981-1995 to put together an effective plan of management. There were many reasons for failure. At the outset there was no thorough stakeholder engagement before listing. Scientists and bureaucrats in Canberra put the Willandra forward without consulting pastoralists or Aboriginal people. Without taking the community on the journey with them they were sure to falter. They rushed into world heritage even before a thorough survey of the research and significance of the region was conducted. The need to change the boundaries of the area in 1996 is a clear example of the hastiness.

But all this could have been ameliorated. The “problem in the Willandra” was passed from department to department, from State to Commonwealth, from committee to commission, and back and forth between all of these. Substantial funding was not opened up until the 1996/97 budget. The IUCN described it as Australia’s “forgotten” World Heritage site. What was most needed from the outset, as most pastoralists who lived through that time will still tell you today, was a plan of management that was co-created by the community. Only when the people on the land were listened to, genuinely listened to, was change affected.

While all this took place farmers had to continue to run their stations and get by. All the time, over those 14 years, they were looking after the Willandra. With a plan of management in place and individual property plans to work with things went well from 1997 to 2003. Although today there are far fewer than there was in 1981, it remains one of the few World Heritage Areas that still has pastoralists as one of the key land managers.

Sources

This report was compiled from oral history interviews with pastoralists and public servants. These were conducted between February and April 2018. Formal and informal interviews were conducted with Garry Griffiths, Ros Griffiths, Michael Ockwell, Ross O'Shea, Jeanette Hope, Ted Richardson, Dan Rosendahl, Des Wakefield, Diane Wakefield, Ian Wakefield and Richard Williams. In total 20 hours of both formal and informal interviewing was conducted. Each interview ranged in length from one to three hours. Further advice was provided by David Gee, Harvey Johnston and Julie Wakefield.

For further information, I have consulted the full run of agenda and minutes of the Willandra Lakes Region World Heritage Area Consultative Committee (1984-1992) and the Agenda and Minutes of the Willandra Lakes Region World Heritage Area CMC and TSAC (1993-2013). All three are held in the Archives of the Willandra Lakes Region World Heritage Area, Buronga, NSW.

Below are the full citation details of works quoted in the report.

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