

Urban planning's contribution to conservation of natural protected areas: the views of communities living in the interface between urban settlements and a natural world heritage area.

Adrienne F Keane

PhD Candidate, Faculty of Architecture, Design and Planning, University of Sydney, Australia

The problem

Natural areas and urban settlements are often close neighbours. As cities grow these natural areas, whether pockets of remnant vegetation or vast areas that appears to have been protected from development due to their wild terrain, interface more and more with urban populations. This nature-human interface is the site of frequent conflicts requiring active management by park managers and urban planners.

Local communities also play a part in successfully managing the interface and contributing to conservation of protected areas. A failure to understand local connections to neighbouring protected areas and to include their perspectives in planning and management decisions can undermine support for conservation efforts or, in the extreme, provoke destructive behaviour aimed at the protected area (Gurran, 2005). Thus, understanding the connections between people and places helps to guide policy and management decisions (Allendorf, et al., 2006).

This study explores these themes in relation to the interface between urban communities and natural world heritage areas, focusing specifically on the suburbs and villages surrounding the Greater Blue Mountains World Heritage Area, on the edge of Sydney, Australia . In addition to domestic designation and management criteria and processes applied to protected areas, world heritage areas are subject to additional expectations, as established by international treaty, *The Convention Concerning the Protection of Cultural and Natural World Heritage* (UNESCO, 1972) (the "World Heritage Convention"). Listing in the World Heritage Convention designates certain cultural and natural protected areas as being of outstanding universal value to all people, adding another layer of 'value' to the protected area. There is some empirical evidence to suggest that this added layer leads to some uncertainty as to what world heritage value means (Bentrupperbaumber, Day, & Reser, 2006) and particularly what it means to the community living with a natural world heritage area (Bentrupperbaumber & Reser, 2006; Carmody & Prideaux, 2008), let alone any particular implications for local managers or planners. However, such issues are largely unexplored in protected area literature and research.

The study

A wider study adopts a case study approach to examine the meanings and values associated with world heritage listing of the Blue Mountains Area for the local community, and the implications for the planning and management of interface areas. Mixed methods, including a random household survey (N=1000), in depth interviews (N=35) with community leaders, stakeholders, park managers, and urban planners, as well as plan and policy analysis, are used. This presentation focuses on results of the random household survey.

The Greater Blue Mountains World Heritage Area is located on the western fringes of the urban conurbation of Sydney which forms Australia's largest metropolitan region and has over 4.5 million people with a projected growth to 6 million in the near future. The natural world heritage area itself is adjoined by a number of settlements that interface with the protected area including 27

existing towns and villages accommodating approximately 74,000 residents, dissecting the area from east to west. (Figure 1).



Figure 1: Locality map – Greater Blue Mountains World Heritage Area (light green) to the west of Sydney metropolitan (Department of the Environment and Water Resources (Cwth), 2007)

After a pilot, the questionnaire was distributed to 1000 randomly selected households in what could be considered to be the more iconic areas of the Blue Mountains. It sought to identify the attitudes and opinions of the residents towards the Blue Mountains National Park, a component of the world heritage area, its listing as a natural world heritage area and the conservation issues that face the park. In particular, the questionnaire aimed to gather information on the frequency of visits and activities undertaken by residents. Questions were asked to ascertain the awareness of local residents that the Blue Mountains was a natural world heritage area, why it was listed as a natural world heritage area and what world heritage means. It then sought to ascertain the impact of the world heritage listing on the attitudes of local residents towards the Blue Mountains National Park and to identify why the residents thought were the most important issues which face the Blue Mountains National Park, whether the park needs greater protection and what additional protection should be accorded the park.

Results

The valid response rate to the questionnaire was over 16% (n=163). These returns plus eight household interviews from the pilot result in 171 returns. This was considered to be a reasonable response rate given that the area is characterised by a high proportion of second or weekend homes, and that the survey was self administered and returned by post. However, there is likely to be respondent bias in that almost all of the respondents visit the area for social, cultural or recreational activities.

The residents' interpretation of the term "world heritage area" as reported in the survey results is closely aligned to the purposes of the international treaty, *The Convention Concerning the Protection of Cultural and Natural World Heritage* (UNESCO, 1972) – that is, to conserve and protect the value of the area. Of particular interest is that more than two thirds of respondents indicated that world heritage listing made the Blue Mountains more valuable to them while of those who indicated that listing made no difference, stated that the area was already valuable to them. The greatest concern expressed by survey respondents was the potential impact to the park from urban development (37%) and other human activities (19%).

Conclusion

Natural world heritage areas are not always wilderness areas. There are many examples of these special places which are located close to growing urban areas around the world. These special places share many of the same interface pressures due to the proximity of urban areas. Urban planners and park managers need to address these. Any planning and management framework will only be successful where the local stakeholders have been engaged.

In this case study, the local residents view world heritage as a protection measure, adding value to a place that is considered to be special. This is consistent with the international objectives of world heritage. Expectations that greater protection for the world heritage area needed to be achieved is evident. These expectations are directed towards the authorities that manage the world heritage area and the interface areas. Expectations of tougher laws and consistent application of planning policies and regulations are also evident, as is the desire for education for all who visit and live near the world heritage area.

The perceived threats to the world heritage area are not necessarily unique. Encroaching urban development and human activities generally are acknowledged problems for the conservation of nature. In this case, as the neighbouring metropolitan grows more pressure will be applied to the world heritage area. The results from this questionnaire show that the local residents have greater expectations for park managers and local planners to protect the world heritage area. Understanding these views, while engaging with the local residents, will underpin urban planning frameworks which support the conservation of this world heritage area.

References

Allendorf, T., Swe, K. K., Oo, T., Htut, Y., Aung, M., Aung, M., et al. (2006). Community attitudes towards three protected areas in Upper Myanmar (Burma). *Environmental Conservation*, 33(4), 344-352.

Bentrupperbaumber, J. M., Day, T. J., & Reser, J. P. (2006). Uses, Meanings, and Understanding of Values in the Environmental and Protected Area Arena: A Consideration of "World Heritage" Values. *Society and Natural Resources*, 19, 723-741.

Bentrupperbaumber, J. M., & Reser, J. P. (2006). *The role of the Wet Tropics World Heritage Area in the life of the community. A survey of the North Queensland community. Revised edition methodology; survey; indicators and measures.* (2nd ed.). Cairns: Cooperative Research Centre for Tropical Rainforest Ecology and Management.

Carmody, J., & Prideaux, B. (2008). *Community Attitudes, Knowledge, Perceptions and Use of the Wet Tropics of Queensland World Heritage Area in 2007. Report to the Marine and Tropical Sciences Research Facility.* Cairns: Reef and Rainforest Research Centre.

Department of the Environment and Water Resources (Cwth). (2007). The Greater Blue Mountains Area. Retrieved 1 June 2009, from <http://www.environment.gov.au/heritage/laws/publicdocuments/pubs/105999.pdf>

Gurran, N. (2005). Planning at the conservation frontier *Australian Planner*, 42, 31-38.

UNESCO. (1972). Convention Concerning The Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage Retrieved 1 June 2009, from <http://whc.unesco.org/archive/convention-en.pdf>