National Scientific Committee on Intangible Cultural Heritage (Australia ICOMOS)

Intangible Cultural Heritage and Place Practice Note: 2019 Survey Results
February 2020

Background
From its inaugural meeting in 2014 and the agreement on the group’s intent to guide an AI approach to Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH), the NSC focussed on developing a Practice Note (PN) and raising awareness of ICH.

The PN was developed and agreed by the Australia ICOMOS (AI) Executive Committee in 2017.

The PN adopted a modified UNESCO ICH Convention (from 2003) definition of ICH to focus on ICOMOS’s particular interest in the cultural heritage of place. Our definition was solidly based in and consistent with the Burra Charter and AI’s other primary documents.

You can explore this in our Background Note, released in July 2019.

This AI approach means that aspects of the ICH Convention’s broader focus, which go beyond ‘place’, are not generally covered. These aspects, mostly outside the AI approach but not always, are such things as language and dance.

We considered that a good way of communicating the approach, initially in the PN, was by providing understandable Australian examples of our type of ICH.

So, the PN included a range (9) of examples or brief ‘case studies’ to illustrate ICH and place, under five UNESCO ICH Convention ‘Domains’:

− Oral traditions and expressions
− Performance
− Social practice, rituals and festive events
− Knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe, and
− Traditional craft skills

The PN review will be invaluable in identifying further examples of Australian ICH, more broadly test whether we have got it right in the PN’s approach, identify what tools will assist in dealing with ICH and guiding us in the NSC’s future activity.

The Survey
The ICH and Place Practice Note survey was open for Australia ICOMOS members and non-members to complete. This online survey was accessible from our website from xxx to xx November 2020.

The survey asked respondents about their experiences in utilising the PN and feedback for ways to improve this.

The Results
1. Common issues practitioners have in identifying, conserving or interpreting ICH:
   - Lack of understanding from place managers on the importance of ICH and engaging with communities
   - Time and budget constraints impacting on to what extent ICH can be explored
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- Navigating complex cases where there are shared or conflicting values between communities
- Establishing thresholds and quantifying ICH compared to more easily identifiable heritage values

2. Ways in which the Practice Note or similar guidance could be improved to assist practitioners in their work:
   - Providing best practice case studies as examples
   - Setting out a methodological framework for identifying, assessing and conserving ICH, specifically addressing:
     o scalability in assessment methodology for cases with budget or time constraints
     o any differences in process for assessing ICH for places versus objects
     o developing targeted policies for managing and interpreting ICH
   - Advice on how to identify a community that may have an attachment
   - Determining the difference between genuine community attachment and vexatious claims
   - Advice on how to balance multiple perspectives where there are shared or conflicting values
   - Establishing terminology i.e. differences between social values versus intangible cultural heritage values.

3. The guidance respondents identified include:
   - case studies: examples are valuable ways to learn – see how others tackled it and more case studies
   - frameworks: how to tackle ICH for a specific project or type of project
   - conflicting or divergent values or data: how to find your way through muddy waters
   - truth finding: how to avoid having the wool pulled over your eyes
   - successes: projects where intangible cultural heritage has been recognized and safeguarded

Next steps
The feedback provided in the online survey as well as discussion from the ‘Lost or Found’ workshop held at the Heritage of the Air conference in October 2019 has been compiled and will contribute to a review of the Intangible Cultural Heritage and Place Practice Note.

The NSC-ICH will work on this review during 2020 and will provide updates as they occur on our website and newsletter.

Thank you to everyone that has participated and provided your feedback.

If you would like to get involved more in the NSC-ICH’s activities, please contact us!