Romancing the Reef: history, heritage and the hyper-real

Thesis submitted by

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for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
in the School of Anthropology, Archaeology and Sociology
James Cook University
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3 December 2003
The Great Barrier Reef is regarded as one of the natural wonders of the world and is recognised as having World Heritage significance. The wealth and complexity of its natural attributes form the basis of a rich and complementary human history. However, management of the region is focused on the conservation of natural attributes, sometimes at the cost of human interests and cultural values. This is symptomatic of the way in which many heritage properties are managed and is a source of problems in the identification and interpretation of heritage. There is a need to better understand the human dimensions of such ‘natural wonders’ to ensure effective management. In order to address some of these issues, this thesis explores visitor experiences and knowledge of the Great Barrier Reef with a particular focus on the non-local experiences and knowledge that underpin the region’s global recognition.

One of the major issues for management is the mutable nature of heritage values. This research therefore seeks to develop an understanding of how such heritage values are formed, transformed and sustained over time. It takes an historical approach to understand the ways in which visitor knowledge of the Reef has been constructed and transmitted both temporally and spatially. Methods novel to heritage assessments are developed and implemented to identify and contrast visitor experiences in the past and those of the present.

The study focuses on visitor sensory experiences of the Reef as a means to understand knowledge of place. A concept of sensuousness is defined and used to understand how knowledge of place is constructed through the human senses, and communicated within and between generations.

The research identifies a number of significant changes in the way in which visitors have constructed and understood the Great Barrier Reef. These include the creation of idealised Pacific islands at the expense of an Australian location and character; the transformation of the dangerous underwater world into a controlled and benign coral garden; and the synecdoche of the coral garden as representative of the Reef as a whole. Central to these constructions is the way in which simulacra are used to create experiences that are increasingly both dislocated and disembodied. As a consequence visitor knowledge of the Reef has shifted from sensuous perception of the Reef as a place or series of places, to the construction of imaginative and photographic simulacra that manifest as experiences of space and non-place.

Through the exploration of this case study, the thesis makes a contribution to both theoretical and methodological issues in heritage studies.
The opportunity to undertake this research has offered many pleasures, including and beyond those of a Great Barrier Reef experience, and I would like to thank the people who have made it possible.

Dr Marion Stell has provided me with encouragement, motivation and support throughout and I would like to thank her for her companionship on this journey.

My colleague and friend at the Australian Heritage Commission, Dr David Collett agreed to act as an Associate Supervisor at a time when he was burdened with his own work. He has nevertheless given generously of his time and most valuably shared his extensive knowledge and ideas. The Commission has supported his role in the project and my study leave.

I would like to thank the staff of the School of Anthropology, Archaeology and Sociology at James Cook University who first invited me to participate in a workshop on their larger Reef task in October 1999. Dr Martin Gibbs, a long time friend and colleague, encouraged me to apply for a PhD scholarship to continue this work. The initiative for the project came from a team of researchers, including Drs Shelley Greer and David Roe who subsequently became my supervisors. I would like to thank them both for their encouragement and support and valued friendships.

My scholarship and other generous financial support have been provided through the CRC Reef. I would like to thank Dr David Williams, Dr Vicki Hall, Dr Vicki Harrington, Bryony Barnett and Tim Harvey from the CRC Reef as well as the industry task associates, James Innes (GBRMPA) and David Windsor and Bob Thomas (AMPTO). FantaSea Cruises generously provided transport throughout the Whitsundays. I was also able to attend conferences and undertake additional archival research with the assistance of CRC Reef Travel Awards and the Faculty of Arts, Education and Social Sciences Doctoral Merit Research Scholarships.

Many other colleagues at James Cook University have made my postgraduate experience an enjoyable one. I have greatly enjoyed the opportunity to share ideas and discussion with my fellow postgraduates. Special thanks to Sally Babidge for sharing an office, music, meals, many conversations and a warm friendship. Ewen McPhee has also been both colleague and friend. Darlene McNaughton has always been keen to discuss and share ideas. Jane Harrington encouraged me to move to the tropical north and was especially welcoming when I arrived in Townsville. I have enjoyed collegial discussions with these students and others, including Mick Morrison, Annette Field, Melissa Carter, Brad Duncan, Kevin Tibbett, Stephen Beck, Julie Lahn, Wendy Hillman, Diane Westerhuis and John Edgar. The staff in the School have provided opportunities for me to present my research as it progressed and I would especially like to thank Drs Rohan Bastin, Rosita Henry and Doug Miles for their contribution to these discussions. I also enjoyed collegial discussions with Drs Maureen Fuary and Mike Wood while in Cairns. Administrative support in the School has been provided by Robina McDermott, Audrey Logan, Louise Lennon and Walter Dixon. Robert Palmer and Wayne Morris have helped with many IT issues and assisted in the transfer of film
footage into a digital format. In their official capacities Professor Helene Marsh, Dean of Postgraduate Studies, Professor Janet Greeley, Executive Dean of Arts, Education and Social Sciences, Dr Surin Maisrikrod, Research Student Monitor, and Barbara Pannach of the Graduate Research School all provided guidance. I would also like to acknowledge the advice of Drs Gina Mercer and Giana Moscardo.

My visits to various archives were always times of intense and focused work and I am very grateful for the space which these organisations provided for me. I would like to thank Jan Brazier from the Australian Museum, staff at the Mitchell Library, the National Archives of Australia in both Melbourne and Canberra, the National Library of Australia, Elizabeth Taggart-Speers at ScreenSound Australia, Daina Harvey from the National Museum of Australia, and Elizabeth Willis from Museum Victoria, as well as Hilary Skeat, Suzie Davies, Julie Jones and Jenny Zadkovich from the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority. I would like to thank the institutions and families that provided permission for me to use material over which they hold copyright, particularly the home movies held by ScreenSound.

I have been supported and encouraged by many friends and colleagues both during and prior to undertaking this research. For long term support and encouragement in life I would like to thank my very dear friend Cathy Stokes. I would also like to thank Professor Sandra Bowdler who has been a significant mentor and friend. Special mention goes to family and friends in Canberra, including Dr Belinda Barnes, Dr Joan Knowles, Penny Pardoe-Matthews and Robyn Black, Dr Anne Bartlett and Dr Greg Fry. Greg introduced me to Dr Tom Griffiths who was generous enough to discuss ideas, sources and approaches at an early stage of my research. Sue Maslin and Charlotte Seymour, and Anna Willock and Ros Priest provided me with homes away from home in Melbourne and Sydney. I would like to also thank Dr Denis Byrne, Dr Bill Jonas, Sharon Sullivan and Malin Blazejowski for their interest in my research and for their hospitality. At a distance my parents, Allan and Lyndy, and my siblings Emma, Stephen, Michael, Nicholas and Christopher have all contributed in one way or another. Stephen has been patient and generous in providing computer support, and both Emma and Michael were interested in my writing.

This research has taken me away from my prior interests in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander heritage. I have nevertheless continued to reflect on many of these issues. I am particularly indebted to members of the Tasmanian Aboriginal community, particularly the enduring friendships developed through my work with the Tasmanian Aboriginal Land Council. Colin J. Hughes, Karen Brown, Greg Lehmann and Steve Stanton have significantly shaped the way I think about heritage and my understanding of what is worth fighting for. They have shared a great deal and have challenged me in unprecedented ways. I also wish to thank those people who I was charged with training in Tasmania and Western Australia, and who as a matter of course taught me. Heritage Officers bridge an enormous gap between what matters on the ground and the way that heritage agencies are structured to take account of these issues. I would particularly like to mention Bill Bennell, Charlie Beasley, Reg Burgess, Brendan Brown, Jackie Kelly, Nelson Boundary and work colleagues Chrissy Grant, Linda Baulch, Kellie Pollard and Vic McGrath. My student status has allowed me to reflect on many of their perspectives and they have undoubtedly influenced my thinking in this thesis.
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<tr>
<td>ACF</td>
<td>Australian Conservation Foundation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACIUCN</td>
<td>Australian Committee for the International Union for the Conservation of Nature</td>
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<tr>
<td>AHC</td>
<td>Australian Heritage Commission</td>
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<td>Aus. Mus.</td>
<td>Australian Museum</td>
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<tr>
<td>ANHC</td>
<td>Australian Natural Heritage Charter</td>
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<td>ANTA</td>
<td>Australian National Travel Association</td>
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<td>CRC Reef</td>
<td>Cooperative Research Centre for the Great Barrier Reef World Heritage Area</td>
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<td>GBR</td>
<td>Great Barrier Reef</td>
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<td>GBRC</td>
<td>Great Barrier Reef Committee</td>
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<tr>
<td>GBRMPA</td>
<td>Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GBRWHA</td>
<td>Great Barrier Reef World Heritage Area</td>
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<tr>
<td>ICOMOS</td>
<td>International Council on Monuments and Sites</td>
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<td>JCU</td>
<td>James Cook University</td>
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<td>NAA</td>
<td>National Archives of Australia</td>
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<td>NLA</td>
<td>National Library of Australia</td>
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<td>Reef</td>
<td>Great Barrier Reef</td>
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<td>RNE</td>
<td>Register of the National Estate</td>
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<td>SAAS</td>
<td>School of Anthropology, Archaeology and Sociology</td>
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<tr>
<td>ScreenSound Australia</td>
<td>National Screen and Sound Archive</td>
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<td>VSL</td>
<td>State Library of Victoria</td>
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<td>WHA</td>
<td>World Heritage Area</td>
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<td>WWF</td>
<td>World Wildlife Fund</td>
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STATEMENT OF SOURCES

DECLARATION

I declare that this thesis is my own work and has not been submitted in any form for another degree or diploma at any university or other institution of tertiary education. Information derived from the published or unpublished work of others has been acknowledged in the text and a list of references is given.

[Signature]

3 December 2003

Date