

Statement of Significance for Water as Cultural Heritage

Heritage is a broad term that can mean those places (e.g., structures, open spaces) and land/seascapes (e.g., farms, towns and villages, historic city centres, protected areas, Indigenous territories, maritime routes) that are valued by one or more communities. Typically, water is either a key or secondary element of such heritage places and landscapes.

A Statement of Significance (SoS) is intended to succinctly and clearly state the principal basis for significance of a heritage item, such as a place. Generally, this is to inform future management and as the basis against which future potential impacts should be assessed.

This SoS employs the standard approach, but in a generic and conceptual way for the whole of water related cultural heritage. It is intended to provide a focal point for all those responsible for managing water-related heritage, to assist managers in recognising where this is the case and how their activities relate to the full breadth of water's cultural heritage significance.

This SoS follows the approach established by the Australia ICOMOS Burra Charter (2013) which recommends that places be assessed under four main categories: historical, scientific (including archaeological and technological), aesthetic and social/spiritual significance.

The statement of significance provides a description of:

- What is significant (in terms of the elements that hold significance);
- How it is significant (in terms of its historic, aesthetic, technical, scientific or social values); and
- Why it is significant (in terms of how the entity demonstrates or reveals the values that make it significant within the local area, the region, the State and beyond).

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What is significant?

The oceans cover 71% of the Earth's surface and contain 97% of the Earth's water. Freshwater resources – including rivers, streams, wetlands, ponds and lakes contain only 3% of the total amount of water on earth.

Water in many forms is of cultural heritage significance, and so are a wide variety of entities, tangible and intangible, relating to it.

How it is significant?

Water as cultural heritage can be of historical, aesthetic and social significance. Entities directly relating to it can also be of technological significance.

Why it is significant?

Historically

Water is fundamentally important to the existence of humans, and of all of the other living things on which human life depends, i.e. animals and plants. Access to, and the use and manipulation of water have therefore played a vital role in human history.

The presence and location of water has always dictated patterns of human occupation, and movement and settlement of populations. At more localised scales, patterns of settlement and development in communities, regions and states have been shaped by water bodies and watercourses, because of the resources – including water itself – that they provide. Water has been used to both facilitate and impede movement.

Maintaining access to water, and then harnessing it as a resource, has been a major focus of human activity for millennia. Systems for land reclamation, water supply, irrigation/inundation, sewerage and harnessing the power of water have helped to create, define and sustain societies. Control of water has long been a strategic, social and political consideration for communities.

Aesthetically

Waterscapes, both natural and anthropogenic, have long been recognised as desirable locales, and thus attractive sites for occupation, for their aesthetic properties.

Water and waterscapes have been major inspirations for music, painting and other forms of artistic expression.

Socially/Spiritually

Throughout human history, the presence of water has been a key feature of places utilised and valued for social activity, recreation and contemplation. Proximity to water has been widely viewed as key to human well-being, and it has been attributed with medicinal and healing properties in many contexts.

Water has spiritual significance for many cultures – either as the manifestation of a spiritual entity or as a medium for religious practice.

Technologically

Whilst the substance water itself is not of technological significance, since the first appearance of modern humans, a broad variety of technologies have been developed to control and utilise it, including for water supply, irrigation, sewerage, transport, power and defence. In the process, many inventions have been made and ground-breaking technologies.