



The Anthropological Society of Western Australia

Mr Jeremy Elliott
Director Partnerships and Agreements
Aboriginal Heritage
Bairds Building, 491 Wellington Street
Perth WA 6000

Dear Jeremy

RE: Verification of heritage information template

Thank you for forwarding us a copy the proposed 'verification of heritage information provided by Aboriginal participants during Aboriginal heritage survey fieldwork' template.

As a Society that represents professional members, who work as heritage consultants, we have serious concerns about the introduction of such a template, as it would seem to be based on a number of unsupportable assumptions about the nature of ethnographic heritage surveys and reports.

Ethnographic, and one would also suggest archaeological, heritage reports are essentially technical documents in which places reported or recorded are assessed professionally. Under the current legislation, an ethnographer's role is to provide an ethnographic report based on our analysis of desktop and field data, which may involve data of several sorts: verbal reports, behavioural observations and so on. These data then have to be assessed and evaluated against the criteria of S39(3) and s39(2) of the AHA and how they might relate to the four site types defined in s5. The current legislation in fact privileges anthropology and ethnography as the evaluative criteria specified in 39(2) and s39(3) are essentially ethnographic features (e.g., relevant custom, tradition, sentiment, religious belief, ritual and ceremonial usage). What constitutes an ethnographic site is therefore a technical issue.

Ethnographers are not mere recorders or 'stenographers' what TOs might say and certainly not mere box tickers, even if many of the surveys we do are quite straight forward and the results would seem to be self-evident. However, it is also the case that that the results of a survey may not be evident until the information provided by TOs has been assessed after the survey has been completed. The template also assumes that there is consensus among



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Aboriginal people participating in a survey about the heritage values in a particular area and how these values ought to be managed.

It is also not the situation that whatever Aboriginal people might say is ipso facto the case, even if a belief is genuinely held. Examples are legion where a genuinely held belief is not necessarily the case. One of our members some years ago was shown a tree in suburban Perth that was reportedly a 'birthing tree', where the grannies of an extended family reportedly gave birth to their children. The only problem with this report by the TOs, regardless of how genuinely it was held, was that the tree, according to the arborist who later inspected it, was in fact a Queensland species and was only about 20 years old. It is also not the case, as has been recently reported during a recent survey, that wherever zamia palms grow was a traditional campsite. Zamia palms are endemic throughout the Southwest and campsites are not found everywhere but rather in particular sorts of locations. There are more extreme examples of stated beliefs that do not hold up to scrutiny. There are those in the Aboriginal community who assert that there was a guillotine at the end of the jetty on Rottnest and that numerous Aboriginal prisoners were executed on arrival. If such a belief was expressed by the TOs in a survey and verified by them on such a template, how would it be then be assessed and represented in the AHIS system? Would this reported guillotine be listed as an ethnographic site?

The introduction of such a template may in effect mean two reports. One listing, using this template, what the TOs might think or report and the second an ethnographic report providing an analysis and an evaluation of what was reported. Which report then would take precedence? What might appear then on the AHIS?

The stated rationale for the introduction of this template is to verify the information provided by TOs and show that it has been captured correctly. However, as the Society sees it such a template only creates more problems than it solves and is based on archaic ideas about what 'constitutes' Aboriginal heritage. The NSHA requires reports to be submitted to SWALSC, which has specified timelines for responding. However, according to feedback from our members, comments from SWALSC are typically not forthcoming. It would seem therefore that one of the unstated aims of this template is to provide a form to SWALSC which obviates the needs for them to read and comment ethnographic and archaeological reports.



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If the DPLH is concerned with improving the standard of reporting and evaluation, it ought to be working with the professions to enhance standards in ethnography and archaeology surveys and reporting and not introducing additional problematic forms.

We have not canvassed our members as to any additional costs to surveys the introduction of such a template might involve. However, we are sure that additional burdens would incur additional costs.

Please do not hesitate to call should you wish to discuss the matter further.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'E. McDonald'. The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long, sweeping underline that extends to the right.

Dr Edward McDonald

President

ASWA

February 4, 2020