



The true cost of cultural heritage

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TRY finding out what the true cost of undertaking an Aboriginal heritage survey will be and you will be confronted by a conspiracy of silence.

The mineral explorers and miners are paralysed by fear of being targeted, so they stick their heads in the desert sand and just pay up.

The local councils don't seem to care because they are spending other people's money but are reluctant to tell me what they are paying out in heritage survey costs.

Government departments are spending millions but won't list it in their budget papers.

My original plan for this page was to list lots of examples of the amount it has cost explorers, councils and Main Roads to get heritage clearances so that farmers can have a realistic idea of what their Local Aboriginal Cultural Heritage Services (LACHS) are likely to charge them, should they need to do a survey or implement a management plan.

But with no examples, I'm limited to telling you my latest journey down the mad rabbit hole world of Aboriginal cultural heritage.

Local Councils: Are all over the place when it comes to doing heritage surveys, some have done none and have no doubt destroyed heritage sites in building roads and now have liabilities all over the place, some have tied their communities up in obligations from being over enthusiastic about looking for heritage sites, some are in denial over their obligations under the new Act and all are deluding themselves over the costs and time delays they now face for projects.

Expect a heritage surcharge on your next rates bill.

What does a Heritage Survey Look Like?: If you are interested in Western Australian history and have lots of spare time, then google up a couple of examples of Aboriginal heritage reports by one of the dozen or so anthropologists' consultancies that provide this service.

Start with '*Kinjarling The Place of Rain - The City of Albany Heritage Survey 2013*' it makes for fascinating reading, all 210 pages of it. I wonder how many of the 28 recommendations the council has implemented and at what expense.

Here is another couple; *Report of an Aboriginal Heritage Survey for the Gnarabup Access Road in the Shire of Augusta Margaret River 2016* 48 pages, *Site Identification Aboriginal Heritage Survey of the Proposed Kemerton Industrial Park in the Shire of Harvey*, 60 pages.

The one thing that stands out about these reports is their length and the detail they go into. These are not simple two or three pages that confirm, photograph and map any heritage that may or may not exist, they are almost academic studies worthy of a Masters thesis as they include vast amounts of detail much of which I would have thought was irrelevant. Here is my favourite from the Augusta MR survey ...

Within the Bibbulmun there were two primary moiety divisions, the Manitchmat or 'fair people of the white cockatoo' and Wordungmat or 'dark people of the crow', which were the basis of marriage between a further four class subdivisions called the Tondarup, Didarruk and Ballaruk, Nagarnook

And the relevance to upgrading a sandy 3km track to the beach is?

Of greater interest is the fact there have been seven previous heritage surveys in the area of interest, which tells me there is a degree of overservicing going on.

The Kemerton Industrial Park survey is relevant for farmers as it covers 5019 hectares of land including farming blocks so is akin to what a full farm survey could look like. It's 60 pages long and the fourth survey, 1975, 1983, 1993, 2008 to have been conducted in the area, not to mention other limited surveys for power and water 1987, 2003, 2005. It is a bit of an industry this survey work.

Across all those surveys only one artefact scatter beside the river was found back in 1983. It must be frustrating being an anthropologist in Australia when they are down to getting excited about rock chips for spear flakes but this is what you will be paying for. Check this out from the Kemerton Report.

Complete Flake at MGA50 385958 6323181 – Vein Quartz. 12mm long x 16mm wide x 8mm thick with a crushed striking platform measuring 4mm x 3mm. Cortex was 50%. There were two dorsal scars and the termination was feather. These were located 40m west of the road bridge and 70m west of the river.

It's not exactly the same as describing a Roman or Greek artefact, but heritage is heritage even if it is a couple of bits of rock. The question is should this be enough to stop future ground disturbance as the State seeks to build the roads and bridges we need or farmers the sheds and dams they need?

The report states no sites were found within the project area due to the lack of permanent sources of surface water on the sandy land and on elevated land suggesting the likely occupation areas would be the eastern border of Leschenault Inlet or the edges of large swamps and river banks.

I suspect the same logic could be applied to most farms, the areas of significance would most likely be the sources of permanent water, be it the granite outcrops or a permanent spring. In theory most paddocks will be free of heritage, but the uncertainty around the new Act and the incentives to find heritage where there may be none, means Buti's claims there is nothing to fear cannot be taken seriously.

Identification of Cultural Knowledge Holders: Interesting in these surveys the researchers spend a fair bit of time identifying the cultural knowledge holders. This could now get expensive particularly when various families and mobs are in dispute as to who speaks for country or more importantly who gets to be paid \$1200 a day to go and look for rock chips.

Most rural communities know who the local elders are, maybe they should take the initiative and sort out a contract to have them do simple surveys cutting out the anthropologists and keeping the money in local pockets. Better than going through the LACHS with all their exorbitant set fees, it would still count in a court of law as due diligence. A phone camera, video and GPS should be ample evidence to record and map locations or the fact nothing is there.

What are sites: I stumbled upon this from an older report. The following can be sites of Aboriginal significance, camps, names place, missions/reserves, ceremonial, natural feature, hunting place, stone structures, artefacts, modified trees, quarries, ochre sites, burials. Interestingly, the most frequently recorded archaeological sites are stone structures including gamma holes, lizard traps, and artefact scatters.

Unfortunately, the new Act encourages the door to be opened to mythological song lines and spiritual beings which can be above and below ground, wandering over paddocks and through aquifers. I've no doubt they exist but a good spirit should not be too troubled by the odd tractor working the ground or a bore being sunk, if they are they will be expensive to keep happy.

No Central Database: Can you believe there is no central electronic database for all the past heritage surveys that are conducted across the State. The government spends millions revving up the heritage Act and setting up for a bonanza of new surveys but there is no easy way to search, digital library compiling all the past work that has been done to avoid duplication.

Another glaring failure of the government, just as checking the Department's map is pointless as you still have to ask them if there are any hidden sites over your farm.

Cost Blow outs: While I can find no details on costs for surveys in WA, I did find one report on the blow out of costs for a survey conducted by a council over east. The NSW Mitchell Shire Council, budgeted to construct a shared walk-bike path with the original project costings set at \$35,000 but it blew out to \$488,555 on a \$1.7m project.

"testing at the site involved manual excavation and sieving of a large number of 'test pits' along the route of the path. After artefacts were discovered, additional test pits were then required to be dug. During the testing, a minimum of two cultural heritage advisers and two Registered Aboriginal Party representatives were required on site."

Here we go again, looking for rock chips, it will be like looking for broken beer bottles in 10,000 years time. What's the point, other than proving someone was once camped there? Does that make it a heritage site worth preserving?

I wonder how many councils in WA have similar stories of cost blow outs as rock chips are found.

Here is another article on costs, from 2013 in 'The Australian' 'Native Title 'Industry' Costs Miners Millions'.

The cost of conducting

heritage surveys has ballooned, from \$11,000 a day in 2010 to a current cost of \$15,000 a day (2013), although there have also been examples where the daily cost of undertaking the survey has topped \$20,000.

I'm told a similar survey today now costs between \$80,000 and \$100,000, with a minimum of 2 -3 days employment for the knowledge holders with between 4 – 10 attending at \$800 – \$1000 a day. I've also heard of \$50,000 for a pastoralists needing to do a survey for new fence lines, hence, I suspect the cost I quoted in previous articles of \$5000-\$10,000 for a farm dam survey might be on the light side.

All roads lead to doing a deal after footy with the local elders.

Not doing Enough: I have taken more phone calls and emails on this issue than any other, more often than not from farmers that start out with a confession that they are not a member and then proceed to give me a lecture on the fact that we are not doing enough.

They are correct, we are not doing enough, there is no multi million dollar fighting fund, we don't have large staff numbers and we can't afford a legal test case, but then they are not helping.

What we can do is the opposition's job, and bell the cat with a bullhorn and call for legislative change.

The goal is to change the regulations and clearly define 'like for like' and go one step further and exclude all previously disturbed cleared freehold farmland from having to go through any form of due diligence, along with removing the exclusion for small 1100m² blocks to level the political playing field, putting an end date for 'discovering' future heritage sites and finally compensating property owners for any loss of property rights.

All this can only happen because 1000 farm businesses out there continue to support WAFarmers or PGA which is more than those who ring me up to tell me they are not a member and we should be doing more.

www.aboriginalheritagewa.com.au Is a new website with information, links and media I have put together, plus an all important survey of those who go through the process to do a heritage survey, so we can capture the costs, delays and issues around the new Act.



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PUBLIC MEETING LET FARMERS KEEP FARMING Live Export Aboriginal Cultural Heritage

Monday 24 July 2023

2.00pm - 5.30pm

Katanning Leisure Centre (Ram Pavilion)

4 Pemble Street, Katanning

WAFarmers is calling a public meeting for farmers and supply chain participants to let their views be heard by Members of Parliament on live exports and Aboriginal cultural heritage.

Attendees include Hon David Littleproud MP, Hon Neil Thomson MLC, Mark Harvey-Sutton CEO Australian Livestock Exporters' Council, David Jochinke, VP National Farmers' Federation.

Other Federal and State MP's and industry groups will be in attendance.



To register, scan QR code or go to
<https://www.eventbrite.com.au/e/let-farmers-keep-farming-public-meeting-tickets-671301229047>

For more info email reception@wafarmers.org.au or call (08) 9486 2100