

Crescent Head Ilmenite Stockpile Rehabilitation

Background

The proposed Crescent Head Stockpile Economic Rehabilitation Project (the Proposal) is located on Crown Land, lying entirely within the property boundaries of Lot 2281/DP 115793 (Pandanus Environmental 2021, p. 4).

In 2021, an Honours student in anthropology at the University of Queensland (UQ), Monica Donohue, completed an Honours research project focused on Indigenous heritage at this location and other places (Delicate Knobby and Racecourse Headland) around Point Plomer Road (Donohue 2021). Donohue was supervised by UQ anthropologists Dr Richard Martin and Dr Kim de Rijke. She worked with Dhungutti people as well as non-Aboriginal residents in Crescent Head.

Research findings

During the fieldwork for her Honours research project in 2021, Donohue gathered qualitative data about the asserted Aboriginal heritage values of Lot 2281, the location of the proposed rehabilitation project. The following is an extract from Donohue's thesis (Donohue 2021, pp. 34-36):

Dunghutti man Reginald Wooderson ("Reg") [...] grew up in a fringe camp near the [Crescent Head] town dump with his grandparents and a few other Aboriginal families, and the women and children would walk 4 or 5 kilometres to camp at Lot 2281, because as he described it, it was a women's site. I was not able to go into Lot 2281, but I learnt how this small group lived during a visit to the old dump with Reg, his wife, an older Dunghutti woman who spent childhood holidays in Crescent Head and the middle-aged niece of this older woman. [...]

During summer, a group of about 20 women and children would travel to the Mineral Deposits site and camp close to the road, including Reg and his grandmother. Reg was told by his grandmother and others that the women would bring any babies born at the dump to a rock hole at the side of nearby Big Nobby headland, known as 'Mermaid's Pool' to wash them. When he and other boys grew too old to go there with the women, he was told by them to go fishing with the men instead. The aunt and uncle of the older Dunghutti woman and possibly another family also lived at Lot 2281 permanently, in tin shacks or under tarpaulin. The older Dunghutti woman and her sister had happy memories visiting them "at the rutile" during the summer holidays and riding horses. The old woman talked about seeing the group of women camping nearby, but not why they were camping there.

This happy community life was ended by the acquisition of the Lot 2281 by Mineral Deposits in 1952. Bulldozers came to the women's site and pushed over the carved trees. Reg's voice caught and he teared up describing his mother and other women crying, hitting their heads, and holding on to the trees to stop them. He described the place as "flattened" and destroyed. The women and children moved back to the old dump, but further dispossession occurred in a routine but no less brutal way. Their shacks were torn down by the Council, then the families would re-build and the shacks would be torn down again in a cycle. Rubbish continued be buried closer and closer to their homes. Six years later, the Council persuaded most of the families to move to the Greenhills community, where they were promised new houses. Reg's grandparents and another family were the only ones to stay in Crescent Head, where they managed to build a house. The small community he grew up in dissipated. After the Mineral Deposits operation in Crescent Head shut in 1982, the mine

complex too was demolished. The dredging machines were sold and the buildings torn down. Over the decades, the stockpile of waste ilmenite and the concrete foundation block have grown over with vines and young trees, until all that is visible of the site is that solitary, pale yellow sign.

Noting the limitations of her Honours field research (18 semi-structured interviews and some site visits), Donohue recorded diverse contemporary views about Lot 2281 among the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal population of the area. She found “Many older non-Aboriginal residents of Crescent Head remember this site only for the mining, and only a small segment of the Aboriginal community know that a family once lived there or have any notion of it containing a women’s site.” (Donohue 2021, p. 37). However, in considering the full range of her data, including data about the heritage significance of nearby places such as Delicate Nobby and Racecourse Headland, Donohue argued “a once ‘destroyed’ site can be re-inscribed with meaning in a new, intercultural context” (Donohue 2021, p. 38).

Based on her analysis of the fieldwork data and anthropological literature, Donohue (2021, p. 54) reached the following conclusion:

My findings contradicted expectations that destroyed sites would [...] lose their sacredness and association with cultural alterity (Merlan, 1998). Rather, these places now contain both the ‘imprint’ of mining experiences (as Cohen (2017) describes in a related example about postmined lands in Cape York) and re-inscribed cultural importance. This re-inscription is based on surviving memories of sites’ historical function and intercultural constructions of their contemporary heritage value (Ross, 2008).

Donohue (2021, p. 55) then set out the implications of these conclusions:

My findings about the continued significance of disturbed sites and cultural landscapes in Crescent Head suggests the need for a more sophisticated analysis of cultural heritage in NSW. Despite State laws allowing for intangible and re-inscribed ‘Aboriginal Places,’ (Sneddon, 2021) only tangible and intact artefacts and sites were deemed worthy for protection in the Point Plomer Road dispute. Frustrations with legislation led to the intercultural partnership I discuss above. I argue these damaged sites, with a history of dispossession of Aboriginal owners, required wider consultation to understand their contemporary significance to the community. This thesis suggests that NSW heritage practice needs to engage with re-inscribed heritage and the contemporary significance of places including damaged sites and fringe camps in order to protect places of Aboriginal significance more effectively.

Conclusion

A recent UQ Honours research project in anthropology has indicated that Lot 2281 is part of a broader sand mined landscape in which some places have retained, or have been re-inscribed with, Aboriginal heritage significance. Field research indicated that site damage or destruction arising from sand mining did not erase all forms of Aboriginal heritage significance. More work with Dhungutti people is needed to better understand the Aboriginal heritage significance of Lot 2281 and the implications of any such significance for future activities at the site.

References

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