

Social Surroundings Assessments in Western Australia: some points for consideration.

Dirima Cuthbert

In Western Australia, First Peoples and their representative organisations, anthropologists and proponents are engaged in assessing social surroundings under the state's *Environmental Protection Act 1986 (WA)*:

"For the purposes of the definition of environment in subsection (1), the social surroundings of man are his aesthetic, cultural, economic and social surroundings to the extent that those surroundings directly affect or are affected by his physical or biological surroundings."

The Environmental Protection Authority's (2016) *Environmental Factor Guideline: Social Surroundings*, states that the environmental objective for the factor Social Surroundings is to *"...protect social surroundings from significant harm."* The legislation is not new, but it has only recently been applied to First Peoples' social surroundings, leading many to question how Social Surroundings Assessments (SSAs) should be done.

Here are some points for consideration.

SSAs are reserved only for significant proposals, such as new mines, so they are often required in places where mining activities are already established. As most readers would know, the Pilbara has been mined on a large scale for many decades. This has restricted First Peoples' access to many important places, in some cases for two generations. Yet access has not stopped entirely, thanks to surveys under the *Aboriginal Heritage Act 1972 (WA)*. Hundreds if not thousands of ethnographic and archaeological surveys have now been conducted in the Pilbara. Archaeological surveys in particular have become an important source of knowledge production at the intersection of Aboriginal culture and mining operations. This is evidenced by displays of cultural objects on mine sites, the fencing-off of artefact scatters for their protection, and the ability of many First People to share information about artefact types and materials and the dates of their production or use. While intangible sites are afforded the same protection as archaeological sites under the Aboriginal Heritage Act, the knowledge associated with the former is often not conducive to sharing in mining operations. The often-strenuous nature of archaeological fieldwork means that archaeological survey teams are skewed to a younger demographic (although there may be one or more Elders guiding the team from afar) and many if not most

teams in the Pilbara are exclusively male. All social surroundings are important - archaeological values among them. However, we must find ways to reproduce knowledge outside of heritage surveys if we want SSAs to capture the depth and breadth of social surroundings.

Social surroundings are not static: they are and always have been in varying states of reproduction, with the relationships between them subject to re-definition. Hence it is worth exploring what is *not* identified in a given SSA. For example, we may not know when hunting ceased in an area which has been mined for decades (although we might assume from the prevalence of human occupation sites recorded on archaeological surveys that hunting once took place there). If there is no living memory of hunting, but we know that it occurred there, can it be a consideration for social surroundings? After all, if we are recording archaeological sites which were lost to living memory until they were 're-discovered', then why not record hunting? Given the right circumstances, hunting may be re-established at the place, just as objects identified on archaeological surveys may be re-established within the cultural landscape. By identifying opportunities which lie latent, we strengthen and diversify social surroundings. While I am not advocating reinstating hunting at a place which is now an active mine site, I am making a case for capacity building which would see social surroundings develop and diversify, as they should. In so doing, opportunities will emerge for the development of new, future social surroundings which are yet to be identified.

Returning to the question of how to do SSAs, in my opinion, there can be no prescribed way. They must be tailored to meet the conditions and circumstances of each assessment. However, three principles may help to meet the Environmental Protection Authority's objective of protecting social surroundings from significant harm:

- 1) Social surroundings cannot simply be preserved by *not* impacting them - they are dynamic connections between People, Culture and Country which must be continually revitalised.
- 2) Through the act of doing SSAs, we are creating, developing, shaping and reproducing social surroundings.
- 3) A given point in time can only be a 'snapshot' of a place's social surroundings. A meaningful assessment will take a long-term perspective, from the deep past to the present and multiple possible futures.

SSAs are a welcome development in WA - an important step in acknowledging the impacts of a

proposal on First Peoples beyond heritage. Managed well, they are an opportunity to protect social surroundings through their revitalisation. The challenge is not just to consider what social surroundings are, but what they could be. How we (First Peoples and their representative organisations, anthropologists and proponents) do SSAs now will help to shape the social surroundings of the future. The responsibilities are great, and the opportunities are even greater.

I would like to acknowledge and thank those I have had the pleasure of working with on SSAs, especially First Peoples. Their input and guidance underpin these points for consideration.