BOOK REVIEW

Australian Natural Heritage Charter: Standards and Principles for the Conservation of Places of Natural Heritage Significance. Australian Committee for IUCN, GPO Box 528, Sydney, NSW, 2001. ISBN 0 642 26420. **Reviewed by Rolan Eberhard**.

The Australian Natural Heritage Charter is the outcome of a two year project by a National Charter Steering Committee with representation from a range of government and non-government national bodies and an indigenous perspective. The Steering Committee hired consultant Lorraine Cairnes whose work on the Charter involved consultation with a wide range of individuals (including a number of ACKMA members) and organisations with an interest in nature conservation. Part of its inspiration was the Burra Charter shorthand for the ICOMOS Charter for the Conservation of Places of Cultural Significance which has become the accepted standard for determining appropriate principles, processes and practices for cultural heritage management in Australia. Whereas the Burra Charter has been around since 1979, there was nothing comparable for natural heritage until the Natural Heritage Charter was released in December 1996.

So, what is the Natural Heritage Charter and what does it mean for karst folk?

The preamble to the Charter gives its purpose as follows:
The purpose of the Charter is to assist everyone with an interest in the significance and conservation of natural heritage to make soundly-based decisions on conservation of that heritage. It is intended to achieve a uniform approach to conservation of places of natural significance in Australia that can be applied to public and privately-owned places, to terrestrial, marine or freshwater areas, and to protected and unprotected areas.

Note that the Charter is intended to 'assist'. That is, its adoption by land managers will be entirely voluntary, relying on its value as a statement of current best practise and its utility as a guide in environmental matters. Note also that the Charter is not tenure-specific its principles and practices are intended to be applicable to a wide range of situations. The sorts of activities which it has been suggested the Charter could be applied to include management planning for protected areas, environment impact assessments, land use planning, education, and farm planning and management.

A feature of the Charter that has attracted considerable attention is that it goes to some length to avoid the practice of giving precedence to biodiversity over geodiversity (or of disregarding geodiversity entirely). I am aware that this aspect of the Charter attracted negative comment from some members of the geological fraternity who have difficulty with the notion of geodiversity in any context, but it is good to see that the Steering Committee stuck to its guns on this one. The Charter explicitly recognises the complimentary role of living and non-living elements of the environment, arguing that geodiversity has value in its own right. This wider vision of why natural places are important is spelt out in the preamble as the 'principle of existence', whereby 'living organisms, earth processes and ecosystems may have value beyond the social, economic or cultural values held by humans'. In other words, a whale or a forest or a cave doesn't need to be scientifically significant, have high aesthetic value, or otherwise be important to humans to justify its existence. Thinkers on the hairy fringes of ecophilosophy are grappling with this proposition right now, but growing numbers of people appear to have no difficulty accepting that natural things have an intrinsic worth of their own. It is excellent to see this reflected in the Charter.The bulk of the Charter's 18 pages are devoted to 34 Articles, each addressing some aspect of natural heritage and its management. While a document of this kind is constrained to a high level of generality, the possible future development of more detailed guidelines on specific topics (e.g. assessing significance, consultation processes, etc.) has been discussed. A selection of some of the Articles is probably the best way to convey the flavour of the thing:

Article 3. *Conservation is based on respect for ecosystems, biological diversity and geodiversity, and should involve the least possible physical intervention to ecological processes, evolutionary processes and earth processes.*
Article 4. *Conservation should make use of all the disciplines and experience that can contribute to the study and safeguarding of a place. Techniques employed should have a firm scientific basis or be supported by relevant experience.*

Article 9. *The conservation policy should include consideration of ecological processes that extend beyond the stated boundaries of a place.*

Article 10. *Elements of geodiversity, habitat elements, organisms and species, which contribute to the natural significance of a place and its ecosystems, should not be removed from a place unless this is the sole means of ensuring their survival, security or preservation and is consistent with the conservation policy.*

Principles of this kind are probably self evident to many people involved in natural heritage management, but spelling them out is likely to serve a range of purposes. One of these is the potential to encourage higher and more uniform standards of environmental practice across the country. There is also the very basic purpose of developing accepted definitions and a common

vocabulary in relation to questions of environmental management. For example, a forester talking about 'conservation' may mean quite different things than, say, a park ranger using the same words. Clearly, this will make effective communication difficult. As credibility in environmental performance assumes increasing importance for many government and corporate players, the Charter is timely on both these counts.

And the implications of the Charter from a karst perspective? At a seminar sponsored by the Australian Museum Geodiversity Centre, Armstrong Osborne predicted that developments like the Charter 'are set to launch geodiversity and geoconservation as important areas of both professional practice and scientific research'. Certainly, we should be greatly encouraged by the promotion in the Charter of a more balanced approach to nature conservation one that recognises landforms, geological features and soils as legitimate conservation goals in their own right, as well as for their role in ecosystems. Historically, karst has enjoyed a relatively high profile in environmental debates; it is therefore likely that if any class of feature stands to benefit from an increased awareness of the conservation value of geodiversity, karst is probably it.

The Charter is available free from the Australian Committee for IUCN. It can also be viewed on the World Wide Web at:
http://www.erin.gov.au/portfolio/ahc/anhc.html.