

A GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE OF ROCK ART PROTECTION

Robert G. Bednarik

Convener and Editor, International Federation of Rock Art Organisations (IFRAO), Melbourne, Australia.

General observations

The previous issue of *Coalition* was dedicated to aspects of the conservation of rock art. Here I will continue with this subject, briefly placing it in a global context and highlighting current pressing matters.

Efforts to preserve rock art vary greatly around the globe, ranging from the truly exemplary treatment of the outstanding Chauvet Cave in France, arguably the best-protected rock art site in the world, to numerous regions where rock art enjoys no protection whatsoever. While we do have the superb site protection systems of several countries, in many others the relevant authorities are simply not aware of their international obligations in respect of the rock art heritage. Examples the International Federation of Rock Art Organisations (IFRAO) has addressed in the past have occurred in, among other countries, Portugal, Peru, Santo Domingo, Canada, U.S.A., Namibia, India and Australia. IFRAO, the world's foremost advocate for the preservation of "prehistoric"

cultural heritage, has found that many, even most of the preservation problems due to inappropriate development are the result of local lack of information or awareness. There needs to be a much stronger public promotion of the principle that all rock art is part of the common heritage of humanity. Nation states merely manage this resource on behalf of us all. Allowing its destruction contravenes international law, and the *Unesco Declaration concerning the Intentional Destruction of Cultural Heritage* (especially Article VI) needs to be better promoted among those who are effectively managing rock art in the various Member States of Unesco. It is clear from my experience that most of the officials theoretically responsible for the protection of rock art around the world – who might be attached to forestry departments, cultural management offices, heritage or land management departments of various types – simply have limited awareness of what their responsibilities concerning the immovable cultural heritage entail. This is not necessarily a condition endemic to developing or badly governed countries; it can be just as profound in developed countries. The example of Portugal could be cited, or the fact that the vandalistic treatment of petroglyph sites in Scandinavia (e.g. by painting them) is still being continued in some regions. Fortunately we have been able to convince Unesco in October 2005 that the guidelines for the protection of rock art need to be significantly upgraded.



Figure 1. Umm Sanman, near Jubba, one of many rock art sites protected in Saudi Arabia. The escarpment is densely covered by petroglyphs, and the fence is about 4 km long

It is also apparent that in those parts of the world that possess particularly famous archaeological tourist attractions (e.g. Egypt, India, Mexico, the Andean countries), rock art tends to be more neglected than in other, comparable countries. Another issue is that there has traditionally been a reluctance in most Moslem countries to recognise the importance of rock art, essentially because of religious bias against imagery, but this, fortunately, is now being overcome by Saudi Arabia taking a strong lead in rock art preservation (Figure 1), and protection is also improving in Morocco, Algeria and Libya. It is to be hoped that other Islamic countries will follow these examples in the coming years.

The global inventorying of rock art is not only important for research or site management, but also for protection: it is impossible to effectively protect a resource that remains unrecorded. IFRAO has been very successful in eradicating damaging recording practices that were still widely used by researchers up to the 1990s in several major rock art regions. It has also facilitated the development of modern recording techniques and digitised processing and manipulation of data by introducing an international standard scale for rock art recording. Moreover, IFRAO has been quite effective in the implementation of improved research standards in most parts of the world, and in a scientifically standardised terminology for the discipline, by creating a rock art glossary and translating it into several of the major languages.

But perhaps the most spectacular success of IFRAO has been its promotion of protection and preservation of rock art. In this work, IFRAO has found itself opposed by many interest groups, ranging from local administrations, developers and industrial corporations to national governments. All of these confrontations have resulted in better appreciation of the need to take care of rock art, and most of them have brought about the preservation of rock art that would otherwise have faced certain destruction.

The most severe confrontations IFRAO has had with state heritage agencies were those in Portugal, first in the Côa valley (Bednarik 1995), later in the Guadiana valley (Arcà et al. 2001; Bednarik 2004), where these agencies were exposed as intellectually corrupt and incompetent. This has led to major remedial

action in that country. The third time IFRAO has had to challenge a government, in Western Australia, has become the greatest confrontation in history for rock art protection.

Australian rock art protection

In terms of its rock art, Australia is a privileged continent. Not only do the researchers of this country have the best access to the traditional ethnographic significance or meaning of its rock art, it also has been blessed with an unusually large corpus of surviving rock art. The reason for this wealth is not, as often assumed, that most Australian rock art is comparatively recent. Rather it is the result of the predominantly semi-arid country's excellent preservation conditions, the absence of any historical iconoclastic tradition, the relatively low population density in most of Australia, and of conservation efforts by various agencies.

Due to the size of the Australian body of rock art, the largest national corpus in the world, a full inventory of it will take many more years, and we still have to expect major new discoveries. Nevertheless, it can safely be concluded that the largest concentrations are those of, from the west, the Pilbara, the Kimberley, Arnhem Land and Cape York Peninsula. The largest single site complex, which is also the largest rock art complex in the world, is that of the Dampier Archipelago, located in the Pilbara. It has been partially surveyed and is thought to comprise well over a million petroglyphs. It is little known that most Pleistocene rock art is in Australia, where it is thought to include many thousands of sites, and that all of it refers to people of a Middle Palaeolithic technology. Therefore there is far more surviving Middle Palaeolithic rock art in the world than Upper Palaeolithic.

Despite the large size of the body of Australian rock art, its conservation is in comparison to the rest of the world of a relatively good standard (Watchman 2005). The great majority of sites are quite remote and of limited access to visitation, and they most often occur on private land. Positive publicity campaigns have prompted many landowners to be quite protective of sites. Only a small number of rock art places have been "sacrificed" to the public, and these have been well developed for visitation. Access paths, raised walkways and viewing

platforms have been erected, there are psychological barriers as well as physical ones, and good interpretation material and visitor books are widely employed at unsupervised sites. As a result of subtle public education measures, the incidence of site vandalism has been reduced significantly. Most of this enlightened public attitude is the result, directly or indirectly, of the work of the Australian Rock Art Research Association (AURA). That organisation has been instrumental in galvanising researchers into a discipline, and in raising public awareness about rock art through the media and various public agencies, at both state and federal levels. Perhaps the most important lesson we have learnt in rock art site management is that positive public perception is the key issue in site protection.

Rock art research is very well served in Australia, with well-established traditions. AURA is the largest rock art organisation in the world, producing the discipline's major refereed academic journal, as well as two newsletters and a series of monographs on rock art. Apart from survey work, the country's researchers have focused primarily on two areas of research: analytical studies, especially on the dating of rock art; and ethnographic studies involving the traditional owners of all Australian rock art. Most of the analytical rock art dating methods currently in use worldwide were initially developed in Australia, and the country continues to be a leader in the field of estimating rock art antiquity. Other research interests being pursued by Australian scholars are conservation or preservation techniques, advanced methods of recording and a variety of specialised analytical approaches.

The Dampier rock art

Unfortunately, in one state, Western Australia, current legislative protection of rock art remains inadequate, and the principal rock art vandal there is the state itself. This emergency state has become especially acute at the huge Dampier petroglyph site complex, where massive industrial development has already destroyed well over 100,000 petroglyphs since 1964. The rest of this substantial monument is being subjected to gradual deterioration from acid rain caused by a petrochemical complex that could easily be located anywhere else in Western Australia. IFRAO is currently engaged in a long-term

campaign to have several planned new hydrocarbon-processing plants located at alternative sites (Figures 2 and 3).



Figure 2. Sacred rock art site at Dampier, Australia, with massive petrochemical industry encroaching



Figure 3. Largely destroyed stone arrangement of 138 stelae, King Bay, Dampier, with nearby industry

The rock art at Dampier, presumed to be the largest concentration in the world, was discovered by me in the 1960s and I have been engaged in trying to preserve it since 1969. The campaign of the state government of Western Australia and its archaeologists has so far destroyed between 20 % and 25 % of the magnificent Murujuga cultural precinct (on the archipelago's main island) through unnecessary development and appalling planning. Although some significant concessions have been made during recent years, the destruction of rock art and megalithic stone arrangements is still continuing at Dampier, and the campaign is in desperate need of international support. The state government of Western Australia is the world's worst cultural vandal, exceeding in its fervour the former Taliban regime of

Afghanistan. The producers of the Dampier rock art, the Yaburarra tribe, were the victims of police-perpetrated genocide, when they were extinguished in a series of incredible massacres taking three months, commencing 17 February 1868 (Bednarik 2002). No compensation has ever been made to the Aborigines, nor have any of the murderers faced a court. Today this historical incident is such an acute embarrassment to the state government of Western Australia that it is keen to see the cultural patrimony of the Yaburarra eradicated as well.

This example shows that in cultural heritage management, there is often more at stake than just cultural values. Rock art, like much other "prehistoric" cultural heritage, is frequently the work of those who were dispossessed, destroyed or defeated — history's "losers". This applies not only in Australia, it is valid globally. Contrary to archaeological claims, we do not really know the correct meaning of "prehistoric" monuments, we have merely appropriated them. It is contingent upon civilised society of the present century to ensure that the destructive powers of the "winners" of history, the powerful and the corrupt, are limited. If we fail in taking those to task who would like to write their preferred versions of history, and who appropriate cultural monuments for political reasons, we have no right to consider ours a civilised society.

To help in the battle to save the rock art at Dampier, please visit <http://mc2.vicnet.net.au/home/dampier/web/index.html> and sign the Petition. Thank you.

References

- Arcà, A., R.G. Bednarik, A. Fossati, L. Jaffe and M. Simões de Abreu (2001). Damned dams again: the plight of Portuguese rock art. *Rock Art Research* 18(1): i-iv.
- Bednarik, R.G. (1995). More news from Hell's Canyon, Portugal. *AURA Newsletter* 12(1): 6-7.
- Bednarik, R.G. (2002). The Murujuga Campaign of 1868. *Rock Art Research* 19: 133-134.
- Bednarik, R.G. (2004). Public archaeology and political dynamics in Portugal. *Public Archaeology* 3(3): 162-166.
- Watchman, A. (2005). Conservation of Australian rock art. *Coalition* 10: 14-18.



ROCK ART PRESERVATION IN BOLIVIA AND ARGENTINA

M. Strecker¹ and M.M. Podestá²

¹Secretary and editor, *Sociedad de Arte Rupestre de Bolivia (SIARB)*. La Paz, Bolivia.

²Archaeologist, *Instituto Nacional de Antropología y Pensamiento Latinoamericano*. President of the *Sociedad Argentina de Antropología*. Buenos Aires, Argentina.

Abstract

In the present article, the authors present a brief introduction to rock art protection and conservation in Bolivia and Argentina, explain strategies and actions taken in the last 10-20 years and suggest what should be done in the future. We also refer to initiatives in other Latin American countries.



Bolivia

More than 1,000 rock art sites have been registered by "Sociedad de Investigación del Arte Rupestre de Bolivia" (SIARB), a private scientific society, over the last 20 years; however most of them have not yet been recorded in detail (map showing the distribution of sites is available at <http://www.siarb-bolivia.org/esp/principal.htm> - "Galería"). Rock art research in Bolivia is still in its initial stages if we consider the lack of an exact chronology and the lack of intensive investigations in many regions (Strecker, 2001a).

State policies concerning the cultural heritage are characterized by centralism of the Viceministry of Culture and the National Institute of Archaeology (DINAR, former INAR), as well as decentralization with a more active role of the administration of regional 'departamentos' and municipalities which, however, lack preparation for this task and experience in this field (Strecker and Taboada, 1999).

The National Archaeological Institute created four parks to protect rock art which were fenced in and whose guardians are responsible for maintaining a vigilance: the sculptured rock at Samaipata in the Dept. of Santa Cruz; the rock paintings of Calacala in the Dept. of Oruro; the rock seats at Copacabana in the Dept. of La Paz; and, more recently, in collaboration with the municipality of Sucre, the rock art sites at Incamachay and