National Heritage listing of Quinkan Country, north Queensland

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Last year the Australian Rock Art Research Association (AURA) made a submission to the Australian Heritage Council, expressing strong support for the Traditional Owners of the Quinkan Country in Cape York Peninsula, Australia, to secure National Heritage listing for this major rock art property. In our submission (published in *RAR* 34: 222–223) we argued that the Quinkan rock art precinct ‘is one of Australia’s most valuable concentrations of immovable cultural heritage sites and as such one of the country’s greatest monuments’. We emphasised that the planning mistakes made in respect of the Dampier rock art precinct in Western Australia should not be repeated in northern Queensland. Readers may recall that in the case of Dampier, a state government wasted hundreds of millions of dollars of public money and lost up to $30 billion dollars of corporate investment due to ‘insensitive planning strategies’. In the north Queensland case, too, resource industry interests have been involved, for example in the form of mining exploration applications by companies such as Jacaranda Minerals.

The application for National Heritage listing was made by the Ang-Gnarra Aboriginal Corporation based at Laura almost ten years ago. It covers 260000 ha of sandstone hills
surrounding the small township of Laura that are home to hundreds of rock art sites, comprising both rock paintings and petroglyphs. Some of the rock art dates from the Pleistocene, in fact it was at one of the sites, the Early Man site, where Pleistocene age of any rock art was first demonstrated in Australia (Rosenfeld et al. 1981). The area is so rich in rock art but at the same time so remote that numerous new sites have still been discovered in recent years. The Ang-Gnarra have developed five rock art sites of relatively easy access for tourism.

The Laura trustees of the Quinkan Reserves are engaged in recording rock art and placing the information on the Queensland Cultural Heritage Database. However, the protection of the cultural sites offered by the state of Queensland is inadequate, and the effect of the National Heritage listing is that the precinct’s protection now becomes the responsibility of the federal government. It will be assessed under the federal Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act and any future development application that is deemed as a threat to the sites is likely to be refused. The listing does not, however, affect mines or other development currently existing in the area.

The heritage listing has been approved by Federal Environment Minister Melissa Price, who stated that “Quinkan Country is a very significant part of our history — it stands out among other regions because of the richness, size and density of its rock art”. In view of the numerous current mining exploration permits and at least one mine application believed to refer to the rock art precinct the listing is most timely. We can expect that it will deter future applications for development affecting the cultural and scientific integrity of the Quinkan Reserves.

**REFERENCE**