

# Protecting **OUR** ancient treasures

By Ian Abbott



> Forest managers and indigenous communities are working together to protect objects and places with cultural significance <

> The forests blanketing much of the east coast of New South Wales today are vital living forests, an ongoing heritage continuing to provide for human needs, retained from the more extensive forests preceding European settlement. These forests continue to reveal the mysteries of dynamic living ecosystems, influenced through environmental and cultural factors.

Aboriginal communities have inhabited these landscapes over thousands of years. Forests contain places intricately linked with Aboriginal dreaming and evidence of the long periods of Aboriginal interaction and use of the resources sustained within these lands and waters. Practices such as Aboriginal burning influenced forest conditions and the presence and abundance of species, while facilitating ease of movement and improved hunting. Access to resources within forests by Aboriginal people is important to maintaining Aboriginal cultural knowledge and practice.

Aboriginal tradition and practice have strong connections with forests and natural resources. Materials such as bark, wood, stone, certain plant material and animals and their skins were integral to sustaining traditional life. The connection Aboriginal people express, describing themselves as part of the land, intricately linked, continues today. Aboriginal communities seek to be involved in how forests are managed, to ensure their heritage is protected and cultural knowledge and practice can be maintained.

An important part of Aboriginal cultural heritage is the physical evidence that reveals the extensive Aboriginal use of forest environments and resources. The identification of places holding special meaning, cultural items and appropriate protection measures requires ongoing interaction between forest managers and Aboriginal communities. Often, this is facilitated by Aboriginal cultural heritage officers who work closely with Aboriginal representatives at a local level to identify and help the preparation of prescriptions to protect this important heritage.

#### **Biography**

*Ian Abbott is the manager of the Aboriginal Liaison and Cultural Heritage Unit of the NSW Department of Primary Industries. His involvement in forest management planning has led to closer work on community participation, cultural heritage management and native title.*

#### **PHYSICAL EVIDENCE OF ABORIGINAL USE OF THE LAND**

- **Carved and scarred trees (boundaries and directional markers, and the result of bark removal for shields, canoes and bowls known as coolamons).**
- **Quarry sites (where stone tools were manufactured).**
- **Grinding grooves (where tools were sharpened).**
- **Occupation sites (indicated by scatters of stone artefacts and remains following the cooking of food, ash, baked clay, middens containing bones or shells).**
- **Art sites (ochre stencilling, charcoal drawing, rock engravings).**
- **Meeting and ceremonial sites (indicated by earth mounds or stone arrangements).**
- **Cultural places (linked to dreaming stories, initiation sites, birthing sites or natural features hold spiritual significance - waterholes, rivers, mountain tops).**
- **Sites of historic importance (contact sites, massacre sites, mission/reserve sites and walk-off sites).**

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The inter-relatedness of cultural and spiritual understandings of landscapes and places with physical evidence necessitates close involvement and participation with Aboriginal communities during planning for operational activities. Forest managers are committed to protecting and managing Aboriginal cultural heritage in cooperation with Aboriginal communities at a local level, in accordance with regulatory obligations.

Over recent decades, forest managers have stepped away from considering this heritage simply as an 'archaeological resource' to recognise Aboriginal ownership of their heritage and an increased role in determining the significance and arrangements to protect their heritage. This shared involvement is integral to building a landscape-based understanding of Aboriginal heritage and helps planners in identifying management responses appropriate to the cultural meaning and importance of objects and places identified as Aboriginal cultural heritage.

Evidence of the more recent interaction of humans and east coast forests, associated with exploration, settlement, use of resources and technological changes since 1788, is also contained within the forests. Although much of the history may not be evident owing to successive wildfires or obscured within regenerating 'living' forests, it is important that items or places with heritage protection are identified and managed.

Forest managers continue to implement measures to locate and protect items and places with heritage significance. It is through this management of areas of conservation and heritage significance that future generations will be able to gain an understanding of the fabric and connection, both Aboriginal and more recent, forming the cultural heritage of forests.