

Conservation of Australia's Historic Heritage Places: Investing in Regional Assets

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Historic heritage places provide important cultural benefits to the wider community, in addition to the use and enjoyment they provide to their owners and users. To enhance the provision of these benefits, governments at all levels own and manage heritage sites. They are the custodians of the vast majority of the most significant or 'iconic' heritage places, and own a very large number of less significant places. Information about their nature and condition, and the cost of their conservation, is inadequate. Arrangements for their conservation are often deficient. There is significant scope for governments to be more strategic, selective and transparent in how they identify and fund the conservation of government-owned places.

Governments also identify, list and provide strong regulatory protection for non-government (privately-owned) heritage places. The existing arrangements are often ineffective, inefficient and inequitable. The system does not ensure that interventions always create a net community benefit. Relying primarily on regulation to protect listed heritage places has resulted the costs of conserving heritage places being ignored, when selecting places for listing, and insufficient incentives for their active conservation. For some owners of heritage places, the regulations impose significant extra costs, especially for the conservation of redundant structures or where there would otherwise be valuable development options. The most appropriate time to consider any additional costs of conservation and to assess net community benefit would be after the assessment of heritage significance and before regulatory control is applied. Negotiated conservation agreements might be used to obtain *extra* private conservation in the few cases where the existing systems would impose unreasonable costs on private owners.

Deciding how much society should invest in Historic Heritage Conservation, where and how, and who should pay for it and how, remain contentious questions.