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PRIME MINISTER

FOR MEDIAMONDAY, OCTOBER 26 1981OPENING OF THE WORLD HERITAGE COMMITTEE MEETING

It gives me great pleasure to welcome to Australia the delegations from the 21 countries which make up the World Heritage Committee, and I also welcome the observers who are attending from a number of other countries.

I am advised that some 61 countries have now signed the World Heritage Convention, and the fact that several countries have joined in the last few weeks shows that there is growing acceptance around the world of the aims of the convention.

The concept of a 'world heritage', which includes both the cultural and the natural heritage of mankind, and which means that individual nations will hold sites and properties of universal value in trust not just for their own peoples, but for the whole of mankind, is surely a profound expression of co-operation between people and a willingness to share.

The World Heritage Convention, adopted by UNESCO in 1972, is an important milestone in the modern history of man's concern not only for his environment, but also for his cultural roots and origins. It is impressive that while this is only the fifth meeting of the World Heritage Committee, there are already 85 properties and sites listed as measuring up to the Committee's standards of outstanding universal value.

I hope the World Heritage listing will receive some publicity in Australia as a result of your meeting here, because our perspectives as a nation would undoubtedly be broadened through a wider understanding of these sites and properties.

This particular meeting of the World Heritage Committee has special significance for Australia, not only because it is being held here, but also because Australia's first nominations for the World Heritage list are coming forward, and while these nominations speak far more strongly for themselves than I could ever argue for them, I would like to say a word or two about them, and then to say something about some of our other environmental and conservation concerns.

One nomination is the Great Barrier Reef. This magnificent maze of coral banks, reefs and islands, stretching nearly 2,000 kilometres along the coastline of Queensland, has been known to the world since Captain Cook ran aground there in 1770. The Capricornia section of the Great Barrier Reef has already been established by the Commonwealth Government as a marine park, and the whole of the reef is fully protected under an Act of the Commonwealth Parliament.

The Commonwealth Government is actively seeking a co-operative approach with the Queensland government in relation to extending the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park, and I am sure that this Committee would appreciate the importance of a co-operative approach between governments, especially a federal system, in matters such as this. But let nobody be in any doubt that the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park will be progressively extended. The question is not whether, but when.

The other two Australian nominations before this meeting for the world list are the Kakadu National Park in Arnhem Land and the Willandra Lakes region in western New South Wales. These great treasures have been unknown to most Australians until relatively recently, although both have been known to Aborigines for thousands of years. It was only eleven years ago that archaeological discoveries put the Willandra Lakes on the world map as an early site indeed in the emergence of modern man, and new discoveries of scientific and cultural significance, as well as of unrealized and amazing beauty, are still being made in the great Kakadu Park. Even since last year when it was forwarded as a nomination for the world list, there have been new discoveries of artifacts which date the origins of human settlement there at thirty or even possibly forty thousand years ago.

In addition to these three nominations, I am pleased to foreshadow now that the Australian Government will soon forward the nominations of a magnificent wilderness area in south-west Tasmania, and also Lord Howe Island, which is a unique example of a Pacific island eco-system.

The Commonwealth Government has shown in a number of practical ways its awareness of the need for initiative and action on matters of conservation and the environment. This Government has prohibited sand mining on Fraser Island. We have banned whaling in Australian waters and put our weight behind banning whaling completely. We have substantially increased grants and research in marine science. We established the Fox Enquiry on uranium and have acted on the Report. We have acted on and encouraged moves towards the preservation of Antarctica, and the protection of Antarctic seals. We have embarked on various treaties and undertakings for the protection of migratory birds and endangered species, and for nature conservation in the South Pacific. We were the first party to the Convention on Wetlands of International Importance. We have established the Australiana Fund. And we have assisted in the establishment of the World Wildlife Fund in Australia.

The World Conservation Strategy was launched in Australia last year and the development of Australia's own conservation strategy is at a very interesting stage. The various sections of the strategy are already in draft form, and will be discussed next month. These sections include agriculture, forestry, and mining, fisheries, including marine resources, manufacturing and processing, and special purpose areas, including Aboriginal lands, unallocated Crown Lands, and nature reserves. The strategy will then be rewritten in the light of these discussions. Then there will be a process of public comment and discussion next year. This strategy, which is concerned with the balance of development and conservation, is expected to be finalised by the end of 1982.

The concern of Australia with the environment and with conservation has a substantial history. The National Trust Movement, which now has a membership of about 80,000, dates back to 1945, a number of field naturalists clubs actually date right back to the early part of this century, and I would add that the total membership of the various nature conservation bodies in Australia runs to quarter of a million.

I would like to commend the voluntary conservation and heritage movement to countries where it is less well-known because it really is a way of involving vast numbers of ordinary people in the conservation of their own heritage, and in a purely Australian context, I would like to take this opportunity to express the indebtedness of Australia as a whole to those people who have, over many years, given significant and effective practical expression to their concerns for heritage and conservation issues.

Despite the youth of this country, we are fortunate to have inherited one of the oldest systems of national parks in the world, because the 15,000 hectare Royal National Park was established in 1879 and some 2,000 hectares in the Jenolan Caves area was set aside for similar purposes as far back as about 1866. Australia is still actively building up as well as conserving this inheritance.

In the five years to June, the area of national parkland has more than doubled, to more than 31m. hectares, with new national parks in every State and territory of Australia. Many of these parks are quite breath-taking and some of Australia's national parks are surely of outstanding universal value. I am sure you will understand that when I speak in such terms I am not engaging in any special pleading, but simply stating the facts as they really are, as those of you who are taking the opportunity to look around Australia after this meeting will see in due course.

But in advance of having the chance to look around Australia, you have a daunting task to undertake, namely, to make a few decisions about the 40 or so nominations that are before you for inclusion in the World Heritage List.

The criteria and guidelines which are laid down in your terms of reference will obviously help in the decision-making part of your meeting, but in the end you will undoubtedly have some difficult and potentially far-reaching judgments to make, and I certainly wish you well in your deliberations.

John Turner said in the "Heritage of Australia" that, "the more we understand, the more we care, and with caring comes the instinct to conserve". I believe that most people genuinely desire to preserve the environment, but it is a fact of life that in many circumstances, something more than mere goodwill is required to ensure the protection of the environment. And while contemporary man has an unrivalled capacity, through the application of technology and acquired knowledge, to enhance his natural surroundings, contemporary man has an equal potential to disturb or destroy the delicate balance of nature, and the fabric of human achievement.

Man is part of the natural environment, and while man surely has the right to utilise the resources of this planet, a critical question is how best to use these resources to enhance the quality of human life, and avoid unacceptable damage to our physical and cultural heritage. It is certainly not acceptable for this generation to rob the next, or for us to pass on to our children a less healthy, a less beautiful or a less enriching heritage than we enjoy ourselves. There seems little doubt that future generations will share our growing interest in the tangible evidences of these roots, and the fruits of human civilization at large, as well as of particular cultures, and we surely have a responsibility to do what we can to make sure that more evidence rather than less is on record for the future to draw upon.

The production of registers and catalogues is a worthwhile development of this connection. Obviously no catalogue or register, no matter how lavish its production, could measure up to the reality of the sites and properties that are represented. But heritage registers certainly can open up unknown vistas, and I would like to say something about the recently published, "Heritage of Australia", which is, as I am advised, the first attempt anywhere to publish a single inventory of the heritage resources of an entire nation.

This book is as fascinating as it is monumental, although of course, something like this is no sooner published than people will, quite rightly, want to start bringing forward additional properties which should be in it but are not. Works such as this, which make history tangible, help a nation to establish its own identity. They provide points of reference by which a people can reach a better understanding of itself and its way of life. There can be little doubt that a World Heritage listing, as it is more fully developed, will contribute to a better understanding of human civilization as a whole. The growth of interest and concern among people throughout the world for heritage issues is a significant development in our times.

Obviously this growing interest will be vastly more productive if it can be given practical direction and effective agreements such as a World Heritage Convention are plainly significant achievements in this context.

The identification and protection of heritage resources is obviously an ongoing process, and for some countries it is relatively easily accomplished. For others, even where the will is present, economic considerations in particular place discouraging constraints on progress.

The UNESCO publication, "Man and his environment", comments that "the countries that are wealthiest as far as cultural or natural heritage are concerned are often among the most handicapped in the action to preserve and enhance it, owing to their lack of qualified staff and of investment capital". And the background notes to the World Heritage Convention refer to the need for some kind of international mechanism to spread the burden more evenly, and it is encouraging that this Committee, through the World Heritage Fund, has been able to support efforts in many countries to protect priceless sites and properties.

This Committee, in co-operation with the nations of the world, has the task of trying to make sure that universally valuable sites and properties from all countries, not just the wealthy and well-provided countries, can find a secure place on the World Heritage List.

The task is a challenging one. I wish you well in your deliberations this week and have pleasure in declaring this meeting open.

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