

REPORT OF THE LAPEROUSE MUSEUM COMMUNITY COMMITTEE

1.0 Introduction

1.1 The New South Wales National Parks and Wildlife Service appointed the committee following representations to Hon Robyn Parker, Minister for the Environment and Minister for Heritage, by The Friends of the Laperouse Museum and other parties. The committee's terms of reference described its purpose as being 'to provide advice to the Head of the National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS) on ways of improving community use, engagement and enjoyment of the Laperouse Museum'. There was a particular emphasis on the need to increase visitation.

1.2 The committee's membership comprised:

David Carment (chair)

Charles Abela (La Perouse Precinct Committee)

Marcia Ella-Duncan (La Perouse Local Aboriginal Land Council – represented at one meeting by Chris Ingrey)

Tony Gentile (The Friends of the Laperouse Museum)

Alistair Henchman (National Parks and Wildlife Service)

Maria Nugent (Australian National University)

Kiel Smith (Randwick City Council)

1.3 Gary Dunnett (National Parks and Wildlife Service) attended all meetings and provided administrative support. Mary-Louise Williams (former Director of the Australian National Maritime Museum) attended one meeting to offer advice as a museum expert.

2.0 Meetings and process

2.1 The committee met four times at the Laperouse Museum.

2.2 The meeting on 16 May 2012 reviewed and approved the terms of reference, received background information, discussed the current National Parks and Wildlife

Service operating model, agreed on the committee process and timeline, and inspected the site.

2.3 The meeting on 31 May 2012 considered the interpretive options outlined in the terms of reference. Limited progress was made. The committee agreed that the interpretive process should principally address the histories of Aboriginal people at La Perouse and of the Laperouse expedition. There was, however, disagreement on whether these histories ought to be presented in an integrated manner and, if they were, the extent to which integration was possible.

2.4 The meeting on 21 June 2012 made greater progress. It reviewed the four interpretive themes proposed in the 2011 draft interpretation plan: *Guriwal*, *Connections*, *Resilience* and *Souvenir*. Agreement was reached on elements of these that could be retained, modified, discarded or replaced. The committee also began the process of making recommendations on other aspects of the museum's future management.

2.5 The meeting on 27 June 2012 completed its consideration of recommendations. While there was general agreement on three interpretive themes, *Guriwal*, *Laperouse the Navigator* and *Resilience*, and on other recommendations regarding the museum, differences of opinion remained on integration and whether the recommendations ought to deal with matters such as retention of specific uses of rooms for the 'Laperouse the Navigator' gallery exclusively and amount of physical space devoted to each other theme or gallery. As agreed by the meeting, the chair sent a draft report to committee members for their comments on 2 July 2012 with a request that these be provided by 16 July 2012

2.6 Charles Abela, Tony Gentile, the La Perouse Precinct Committee, Maria Nugent and Mary-Louise Williams provided written comments on the draft report that the chair took into careful consideration when preparing the final report. Charles Abela requested that the La Perouse Precinct Committee's comments 'be made part of the final report in their entirety'. To do so, however, would have resulted in some repetition and disproportionate coverage of the Precinct Committee's views in comparison with those of other committee members who responded to the draft

report. The Precinct Committee's opinions are included in detail but not in exactly the same form that it provided.

3.0 Recommendations

3.1 The three interpretive themes (Tony Gentile in his comments on the draft report added 'and/or galleries') should be *Guriwal*, *Laperouse the Navigator* and *Resilience*.

3.2 *Guriwal* includes the natural environment of the La Perouse area before the first Europeans arrived there, Aboriginal links to and use of that environment, and other elements of La Perouse's Aboriginal history.

3.3 *Laperouse the Navigator* covers the background, story and wider implications of the Laperouse expedition. Interpretation of the theme should include the display of items that were part of the 1988 bicentennial gift as well as any more recent additions or interpretations of the history.

3.4 *Resilience* includes connections between the first two themes. It also covers some other aspects of the La Perouse area's history, such as building the cable station and Happy Valley, but these ought to be subsidiary to the Aboriginal and Laperouse stories.

3.5 Contacts between Aboriginal people and the Laperouse expedition and Aboriginal survival after 1788 should be given attention.

3.6 Temporary exhibitions, both commercial and non-commercial, on a variety of topics associated with the interpretive themes, ought to aim at maintaining currency and interest in the museum as well as encouraging repeat visitation and school visits.

3.7 There is an urgent need for basic site maintenance that addresses safety issues, including rear access and the provision of floodlighting.

3.8 There is an important role for volunteers, particularly the La Perouse Aboriginal community and The Friends of the Laperouse Museum, in the museum's operation,

including events, functions and collection management. The Randwick City Council's involvement should also be encouraged. Criteria are needed for community/volunteer involvement.

3.9 Commercial activities such as guided tours, events, functions and programs of talks or lectures ought to be encouraged but they must be consistent with the national park setting and sensitive to the building, exhibitions and the wishes of local communities, including the Aboriginal community. They also should aim where appropriate to provide opportunities for local people and their enterprises.

3.10 Marketing strategies, including those that encourage school groups to visit the museum, are needed.

4.0 Some key issues discussed

4.1 Charles Abela questioned whether there was certainty about *Guriwal*'s meaning and if it was appropriate as a theme. Maria Nugent (author of the book *Botany Bay: Where Histories Meet*) advised that there were credible historic references to *Guriwal* as a place name for the La Perouse headland and the adjoining area. Marcia Ella-Duncan pointed out that the La Perouse Local Aboriginal Land Council accepted *Guriwal* as the traditional name.

4.2 Charles Abela and Tony Gentile expressed concern that inadequate National Parks and Wildlife management, continued reduced promotion to the 'nil promotion' now, continued reduced operating hours and abysmal maintenance of the exhibits at the Laperouse Museum as well as the cable station building were largely responsible for the decline in its visitation. Marcia Ella-Duncan felt that the museum had never properly acknowledged or interpreted Aboriginal perspectives. Alistair Henchman agreed that the museum in its current configuration was not attracting enough visitors. He said this was a reason for talking about how it might be re-invigorated.

4.3 Charles Abela and Tony Gentile questioned whether the exhibition space was sufficient to make provision for subjects beyond the histories of Aboriginal people and the Laperouse expedition. Mary-Louise Williams, however, believed that several

parts of associated stories, like that of the cable station building, ought not be lost. These could be crafted in an accessible manner and big stories told in a small space, particularly through the use of audio-visual technologies. Marcia Ella-Duncan observed that *Resilience* was a universal theme that applied very strongly to La Perouse. Happy Valley, for instance, was a place of survival for Sydney's poor and dispossessed. There was general agreement that issues relating more strongly to other parts of the headland, such as Bare Island, need not be addressed within the museum.

4.4 Charles Abela argued that the general public was insufficiently interested in Aboriginality to make Aboriginal themes significantly attractive, a view with which some other committee members completely disagreed. He and the La Perouse Precinct Committee pointed to evidence such as the closure of the cultural centre at Bulli Tops after about two years and closure of the Aboriginal gallery at the Laperouse museum after about one year, that they felt showed Aboriginality would have a negative effect on visitation. The La Perouse Precinct Committee believed that before any changes to the museum were considered there should be independent market research to ascertain from potential visitors and tour organisers what they wanted to see in the museum. Such research would necessarily encompass schools, local guides, airport and seaport tour guides, group tour operators, bus operators, a variety of clubs such as Probus, tourism associations and, given the Bulli Tops experience, the Illawarra Development Corporation and the Wollongong City Council.

4.5 There was general agreement that the *Souvenir* theme proposed in 2011 was unnecessarily vague. Visitors were unlikely to relate to it.

4.6 Alistair Henchman pointed out that the first step in the museum redevelopment process was to document the proposed upgrade. A proposal would then be taken to government, the private sector and the community to seek financial and/or operational support. The project had the potential to attract support from all three levels of government. Selected aspects, such as the establishment of functions and events facilities, might attract private sector involvement through lease or licence arrangements. Sponsorships and donations could also be encouraged. Kiel Smith noted that the Randwick City Council would expect to see a well-structured financial

plan for the museum. Tony Gentile pointed out that due to current state government financial restrictions the major revamp suggested was unlikely to find favour.

4.7 Mary-Louise Williams observed that it was very expensive to maintain museums with major costs being involved in the regular renewal of exhibits and the maintenance of an environment required for materials conservation. She also, though, pointed to the many opportunities to access assistance and expertise through partnerships with other Sydney institutions such as the Australian National Maritime Museum. She said the Laperouse Museum could provide community space that people might use for diverse purposes, not just viewing exhibits. Museums were no longer places for quiet contemplation but instead places where good stories were told in an exciting atmosphere.

4.8 Committee members were unable to reach consensus on whether the interpretive scheme should focus primarily on one of the three options identified in the committee's terms of reference: (1) a focus on a single historic theme; (2) addressing all of the key historic associations and themes in an integrated fashion; (3) addressing the key historic themes as discreet elements within a series of displays organised on a compartmentalised basis. Charles Abela said that because there were no surviving direct accounts of meetings between the Laperouse expedition and local Aboriginal people there was no basis for providing a speculative interpretation of that topic. He further proposed that the Laperouse theme needed to be maintained as a distinct story in its own parts of the building so far as possible in its 1988 configuration due to the circumstances of the bicentennial gift, that if it was made subservient to other themes the La Perouse site would cease to be of international significance, and there ought not be an emphasis on dispossession and protest. Tony Gentile supported the original museum plan that had the Laperouse story in the ground and first floor sections of the building's southern wing, with the northern wing's ground floor being available for the Aboriginal story. He suggested that the central room could be used for links between the two stories. He also argued that removed exhibits, maps and paintings should be reinstated to the museum where that was still possible and there be the opportunity for The Friends of the Laperouse Museum to work with a curator to restore the Laperouse exhibits. Maria Nugent pointed out in response to Charles Abela's statement on the apparent lack of direct accounts that most of Laperouse's

records about the expedition's time at Botany Bay were lost when his ships were wrecked. Absence of evidence, though, was not evidence of absence. She said that there were many sources that could assist an understanding of contacts between the Laperouse expedition and Aborigines, ranging from accounts of Governor Phillip's presence at Botany Bay to the broader experience of encounters between the French and Indigenous peoples across the Pacific. She also felt that a separate presentation of the Laperouse expedition perpetuated a division that missed out on the real story of La Perouse as a place where connections were forged between people and histories met. Perhaps the only option for ending the disagreement on integration, she suggested at one stage, was by closing the museum and starting from scratch. That would create the opportunity to think about the issues from a fresh perspective. She and Marcia Ella-Duncan preferred to see integration throughout the museum as the best way of exploring each theme. Marcia Ella-Duncan commented on the continuing importance of connections between the Aboriginal community, the Laperouse expedition and the French community: separating the Laperouse and Aboriginal stories would diminish both. She felt that the committee's objective ought to be the promotion of a vibrant, dynamic and contemporary interpretive experience, not the perpetuation of separate histories. The local Aboriginal community included descendants of those who watched Cook, Laperouse and Phillip enter Botany Bay. She said that the museum should also tell the contemporary stories of local Aboriginal people. While being strongly of the view that the community's story, both natural and human, be covered within the museum and supporting the need to give attention to contact between Indigenous Australians and European explorers, Mary-Louise Williams believed that a gallery should be set aside exclusively for the Laperouse story. This, together with the story of Pere Receveur and the significance of his memorial, was a major theme. There was an obligation, she argued, to maintain a gallery funded by the Bicentennial grant, the French community in Australia and the French government through the Musee national de la Marine in Paris.

4.9 Tony Gentile cautioned that the involvement of volunteers required careful National Parks and Wildlife Service management. The Friends of the Laperouse Museum needed a specific proposal outlining what would be expected from their members before endorsing any arrangements. Their participation would be focussed

on the *Laperouse the Navigator* theme. Marcia Ella-Duncan strongly supported volunteers' involvement.

4.10 Marcia Ella-Duncan said that local Aboriginal groups were interested in running events and functions at the museum. These should contribute income for the museum's maintenance. They ought, though, also be sensitive to the museum's cultural values and national park setting and not be an opportunity for external tour operators to tell inappropriate stories about the place. The committee agreed that a program of lectures or talks, possibly in partnership with other organisations, might encourage people to come to the museum.

5.0 Acknowledgements

I am grateful to committee members for their contributions. I also acknowledge Gary Dunnet's considerable assistance in a variety of ways.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "David Carment". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a stylized 'D' and 'C'.

David Carment

17 July 2012