Rock art ethics resource kit: a guide to the ethics of rock art research, management and conservation (version 2.0)

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Introduction

This document was produced as a resource for Indigenous peoples, academics, consulting archaeologists and the general public – indeed, anyone intending to visit, record, manage, conserve or otherwise interact with rock art sites.

Rock art consists of paintings, drawings, engravings, stencils, bas-relief carvings and figures made of beeswax in rock shelters and caves, on boulders and platforms. There may be over a million surviving rock art sites worldwide, while Australia has at least 100,000 rock art sites. Many new discoveries are made worldwide each year. The oldest surviving Australian rock art is at least 15,000 years of age while in France there are images over twice that age. In many parts of the Americas, Australia, Africa and Asia rock art continued to be made until very recently.

Rock art sites are special, often spectacular places that reflect ancient experience and often spirituality. They are locations where aspects of ceremony, belief and history are recorded in visual form. They are a testament to thousands of years of Indigenous culture and cultural interaction with other creatures, other peoples and the environment.

Rock art is an archive of Indigenous arts stretching back tens of thousands of years. It also is a major component of world art history. Consequently, an ethical approach to all aspects of the study of rock art is a necessity.

The Rock Art Ethics Resource Kit may be reproduced without permission but should be referenced in publications and on web sites in accordance with standard academic practice. The resource kit is organized into three major sections that provide (a) background information, (b) web address links to particular codes of ethics and (c) a couple publications on the ethics and politics of rock art conservation.
Background information

Rock art research, management and conservation has been undertaken in various parts of the world for over 100 years but it has only been in recent decades that ethical protocols have been established and in many parts of the world specific ethical considerations for rock art have not been articulated at all. In this document key concerns are summarised and important aspects of established codes of ethics are discussed. Links to web sites with rock art, archaeology and other heritage codes of ethics are provided so that different situations can be addressed by following various forms of professional practice.

As a general principle anyone engaged in rock art research should respect the ethics and protocols of the countries and communities they work in, respect the local people living close to and/or associated with rock art and respect the rock art itself, as well as the landscapes the rock art is situated in. This may be considered an overriding principle although agreed international heritage protocols need also to be adhered to and in some cases there are specifics guidelines for certain activities (e.g. removal of samples, certain forms of conservation, recording methods, etc.). General conduct at sites is a major concern worldwide.

So in many ways respect is the key to understanding rock art ethics. This includes not only respect for the rock art images, sites and larger heritage areas but also for the contemporary Indigenous peoples associated with the art, the original makers, the citizens and government of the countries where rock art is found, local archaeologists, rock art managers and others involved in rock art research, management and conservation – in other words, respect for people, cultural heritage and the natural environment. In a general sense this means impacting physically as little as possible on sites, building collaborative relationships and friendships, communicating knowledge obtained through research in accessible and appropriate ways, addressing concerns of stakeholders and conducting oneself in a professional, courteous manner.

Most universities and some museums have specific research protocols that must be followed when undertaking research that involves animals and/or living humans. In Australia, Griffith University has one of the most rigorous assessment procedures with several manuals of guidelines and standardised ways of seeking ethical approval before research is undertaken. If research commences before approval is received sometimes information gathered cannot be published or used in an academic thesis. These protocols are in place to protect not only the institution and the subjects of research but also researchers themselves. In terms of rock art research, ethics approval is needed if the research is to involve interviewing Indigenous peoples about any aspect of the art, collecting oral histories, filming people and so forth. Details about how information is to be stored and how secret/sacred information, should it be acquired, is handled are particular concerns. Usually in Australia if researchers from more than one university are involved in a project ethics approval only needs to be obtained from one academic
Many national parks organizations also have research protocols and sometimes before a research project commences an agreement needs to be drawn up, as with the case study below.

The Australian National University’s **Rock Art Research Centre** (established late 2009) has a straightforward approach to ethics:

The Rock Art Research Centre encourages multi-disciplinary and multi-cultural scientific investigations of rock paintings, drawings, stencils, prints, engravings (petroglyphs) and designs made of beeswax found in rock shelters and caves, on boulders and on open air platforms. These are investigated using both Indigenous and non-Indigenous perspectives to better understand many aspects of Australia’s past including contact history, climate and cultural change, human landscape relationships, identity and symbolic behaviour.

When conducting research the Rock Art Research Centre respects the wishes of Indigenous Australian communities in relation to rock art and its study. Members of the RARC adhere to recognised codes of ethics, e.g. as established by the World Archaeological Congress (WAC), the Australian Archaeological Association (AAA), Australian Rock Art Research Association (AURA), the AIATSIS Guidelines 2002 for Ethical Research for Indigenous Studies, WIPO Conventions and specifically the UN covenants for dealing with tangible and intangible cultural heritage. A primary Centre concern is the involvement of Indigenous communities in rock art research, conservation and management as genuine collaborative partners. The Centre also follows university protocols in terms of the ethical nature of research and respect for intellectual and cultural property rights.


One of the easiest to understand rock art codes of ethics is provided by the **Eastern States Rock Art Research Association**, although it pertains specifically to site visitation by the general public. They provide a list of ten recommendations to be followed when visiting rock art sites, all of which revolve around minimizing one’s impact on the site (such as no touching, no graffiti, no application of substances to art panels, no fires/smoking, etc.). They also emphasize the theme of respect:

Importantly, rock art is sacred to many Native Americans, and it is a part of prehistory for everyone. From an attitude of respect, we should endeavor to protect the past for future generations to study and enjoy. *Enjoy rock art sites in a spirit of respectfulness, and connect with the past.*

(see [http://www.public.asu.edu/~rexweeks/Ethics.htm](http://www.public.asu.edu/~rexweeks/Ethics.htm))
Further information about pertinent codes of ethics:


7. Canadian Archaeological Association (http://www.canadianarchaeology.com/ethical.lasso)


Publications on ethics and rock art conservation:
