



Risk and resilience: Baiame's Cave and creation landscape, NSW, Australia

Abstract

For Aboriginal people on the east coast of New South Wales (NSW), Australia, Baiame is the creator. At Baiame's Cave, located in the Upper Hunter Valley, Baiame is depicted on the rear wall of an overhanging rock shelter. Overlooking a broad grassy valley, he is represented as an eagle with penetrating eyes, soaring over the land he created. The site is of immense cultural significance to the people of the Wonnarua Nation and other Aboriginal people in the region and beyond. This significance has recently been recognised by statutory protection on two separate NSW heritage lists. The site is currently facing environmental and land use pressure, including coal mining and continued agricultural production. Additional pressures are directly attributable to heritage listing and include increased visitation and cultural tourism. To manage the risks, the Wonnarua people have built relationships with local land owners and public authorities. In seeking continued access to the cave, they have worked with key stakeholders to identify and manage risks to the land and the site. This is essential to supporting cultural resilience, intergenerational equity and revitalization of traditional customs, beliefs and cultural practices within the community. This paper seeks to provide an understanding of the Aboriginal attachment to Baiame Cave and their cooperative approaches to land management to build sustainable forms of cultural and environmental resilience for heritage.

Keywords: cultural landscape; nature-culture relationship; resilience through sustainable land management; risk management; traditional knowledge

1. Introduction

Baiame Cave is an Aboriginal rock art site, located on private property near Milbrodale, in the Upper Hunter Valley, New South Wales (NSW) (Figure 1). The cave is 20 kilometres southwest of the town of Singleton and one kilometre southwest of the town of Milbrodale, on the western side of Bulga Creek.

Facing the northeast, Baiame Cave is located within a sandstone escarpment on the fringe of a valley. It is situated in the foothills at the transition between the valley floodplain and the higher bisected sandstone landscapes of the Hornsby Plateau. The cave is located approximately 24 metres above the valley floor and provides expansive views of the Hunter Valley (Figure 2). The cave itself has been formed over millennia through natural weathering processes typical of such sandstone and which result in shelters forming in bands as weathering works backwards and upwards from a weak point.

On the rear sandstone 'wall' of the cave, Aboriginal artwork in white and red pigment is visible (Figure 3). A large male figure with unusually large white eyes and extended outstretched arms is the key visual motif. The male figure is located just off the cave's centre point. The figure is understood to be a representation of Baiame, an ancestral creator being and the 'Father of All'. A series of stencils are also visible within the cave interior, including hand prints, boomerangs, a hafted axe, and what appears to be a spear (Table 1).

The property on which the cave is situated is a working farm. Activities undertaken on the property include grazing, cropping and recreation. Public access to the cave is by permission, but generally allowed for Aboriginal people, members of the public, school groups and tourists to the region. The site is accessed by public and then private roads, both sealed and unsealed. Facilities at the cave are limited but include stairs and a viewing platform, with a single interpretive sign.



Figure 1: Location of the Baiame Cave, NSW, Australia. Source: GML Heritage 2018.



Figure 2: At dawn, view from Baiame Cave overlooking the sweeping valley to the northeast. Source: Authors 2017.



Figure 3: Baiame and associated artwork within the Baiame Cave, during recording by the project team. Source: Authors 2017.

1.1. Heritage Listings

Baiame Cave and the wider cultural landscape setting is of spiritual, social, aesthetic, historical and scientific significance to the local Aboriginal people and the wider community, both Australian and international. In recognition of its significant heritage values, Baiame Cave is listed on the NSW State Heritage Register, under the *Heritage Act 1977* (NSW) (the Heritage Act). The cave is also a declared 'Aboriginal Place' under Section 84 of the *National Parks and Wildlife Act 1974* (NSW) (the NPW Act). These two separate acts are regulated by the Office of Environment and Heritage (OEH) and the Heritage Division of the OEH.

1.2. Project Objectives

Baiame Cave has a low tolerance to change. Identifying realistic and practical ways of managing risk was a key objective shared by both the landowner and the Wonnarua people. The project objective for the local Aboriginal community was to develop community driven management planning that maintains their relationship with the landowner and leverages new opportunities afforded by the heritage listing—for instance, accessing government grants for heritage management and interpretation. Management planning therefore needed to be developed with community concerns at the forefront—not academic thought or regulatory constraints. Community driven management could reduce actual risks, whilst enhancing the economic and social (including health) wellbeing of the local Aboriginal community.

Priority 3 of the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015-2030 (United Nations 2015) underpinned the development of management for the place, notably:

Public and private investment in disaster risk prevention and reduction through structural and non-structural measures are essential to enhance the economic, social, health and cultural resilience of persons, communities, countries and their assets, as well as the environment. These can be drivers of innovation, growth and job creation. Such measures are cost-effective and instrumental to save lives, prevent and reduce losses and ensure effective recovery and rehabilitation (United Nations 2015:19).

Despite the place's significant heritage values, Baiame Cave is considered vulnerable to multiple impacts resultant from unrestricted and uncontrolled access. The key risks include direct and indirect impacts to the art, and changes to environmental conditions that may materially alter the place, including the cultural landscape setting. Potential threats such as incompatible land uses and increasing public visitation, as well as dust, vibration, fire and water ingress also pose threats to the values.

The statutory regulators, the NSW Office of Environment and Heritage (OEH) and Heritage Division, strongly encouraged the preparation of a management plan for the cave and required the preparation of a Conservation Management Plan (CMP) to support the State Heritage Register listing. The management plan needed to respond to the heritage values of the Aboriginal Place and set out management policy to conserve the heritage significance of the place for current and future generations, with policy to conserve and ensure continuing protective care. A CMP was therefore developed to provide a framework for the short and long-term future conservation and management of the site (GML 2018).

1.3. Project Collaborators

The CMP was developed collaboratively with heritage consultants GML Heritage (GML), Stepwise Heritage and Tourism Pty Ltd (Stepwise) and the Baiame Cave Working Group (the working group). The working group comprised the landowner, local Wonnarua people, key tourism stakeholders and the OEH.

2. Methodology

A multidisciplinary team, including Aboriginal archaeologist, rock art conservator, cultural heritage and risk management specialists, undertook a series of on-site (on Country) inspections and workshops with representatives of the Wonnarua Nation, local property owners and community representatives. These engagements were aimed at:

- identifying risks to the site from both natural and human hazards;
- developing mitigation strategies to minimize the risks;
- facilitating educational opportunities for sharing Aboriginal culture and knowledge;
- ensuring sustainable land management and intergenerational equity; and
- preparing a risk management strategy for Baiame Cave and its associated cultural landscape.

Underpinning these aims were the Sendai Framework Priority 3 principles.

3. Baiame Cave—The Place

3.1. Baiame Cave—A Physical Description

Baiame Cave has always attracted interest from visitors and academics. It was first recorded in 1893 by Robert Hamilton Mathews (1841–1918), a surveyor and anthropologist. Mathews prepared the first written description of Baiame Cave (Mathews 1893), which provides 'baseline' information. The information assists in the development of an 'understanding' of the cave, the artwork and the broader physical context. Given Mathews' description was recorded over 100 years ago, it provides evidence that is useful for the assessment of the cave's current physical condition and the rate of change over time.

The art within Baiame Caves is distributed across the rear of the shelter (Figure 3). In 2017, for the purposes of the condition assessment, the shelter wall was divided into three panels (Figures 4 to 6). Panel boundaries were determined by a logical separation provided by two distinct vertical fissures in the rear wall of the shelter.

Table 1 provides an overview of the art located on each panel. Two different techniques of applying paint were noted, which provided context for Aboriginal tradition associated with maintenance of the art within the shelter.

Table 1: Art Positioned Within Each Panel at Baiame Cave

Panel	#	Motif	Technique	Colour	Comments
A	1	Hand (left) with half of forearm	Stencil	White	
	2	Boomerang	Stencil	White	
	3	Axe	Stencil	White	
	9	Extended arm of anthropomorph	Dry pigment	Red + white	
B	4	Stick	Stencil	White	
	5	Hand (right) with forearm	Stencil	White	
	6	Hand (left)	Stencil	White	
	7	Axe	Stencil	White	
	8	Hand (right)	Stencil	White	
	9	Anthropomorph	Wet and dry	Red + white	Red infill wet and dry. Dry white outline. Wet solid infill eyes. Wet solid patch on lower abdomen
	10	Non-figurative (vertical tally mark)	Wet solid infill	White	To left of anthropomorph
	11	Non-figurative (vertical tally mark)	Wet solid infill	White	To left of anthropomorph
	12	Non-figurative (vertical tally mark)	Wet solid infill	White	To left of anthropomorph
	13	Non-figurative (vertical tally mark)	Wet solid infill	White	To right of anthropomorph
	14	Non-figurative (vertical tally mark)	Wet solid infill	White	To right of anthropomorph
	15	Non-figurative (vertical tally mark)	Wet solid infill	White	To right of anthropomorph
	16	Non-figurative (vertical tally mark)	Wet solid infill	White	To right of anthropomorph
	17	Boomerang	Stencil	White + black	Black may have been added at a later date
18	Boomerang	Stencil	White		
	19	Hand (left)	Stencil	White	
C		No art has been recorded on this panel			
Other possible motifs recorded by others that require location confirmation					
		Anthropomorph	Dry infill	Black	Recorded by Macdonald 1986
		Macropod	Dry outline	White	Recorded by Macdonald 1986
		Macropod		Black	Noted by Creamer and Kelly in 1974
		Boomerang	Dry outline	Red + black	Recorded by Macdonald 1986
		Boomerang	Dry outline	Black	Recorded by Macdonald 1986
		Unidentified solid	Dry infill	White	Recorded by Macdonald 1986

Panel	#	Motif	Technique	Colour	Comments
		Unidentified solid	Dry infill	Black	Recorded by Macdonald 1986

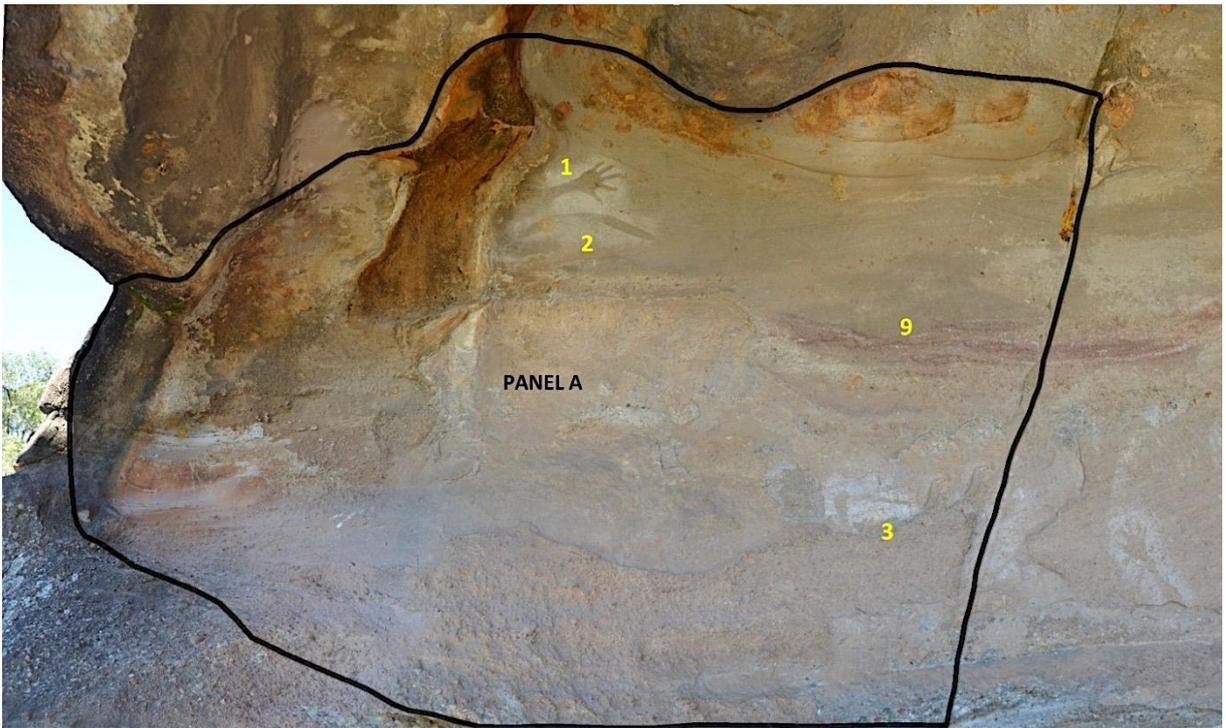


Figure 4: Panel A, located on the left side of the cave. (Source: GML 2017).

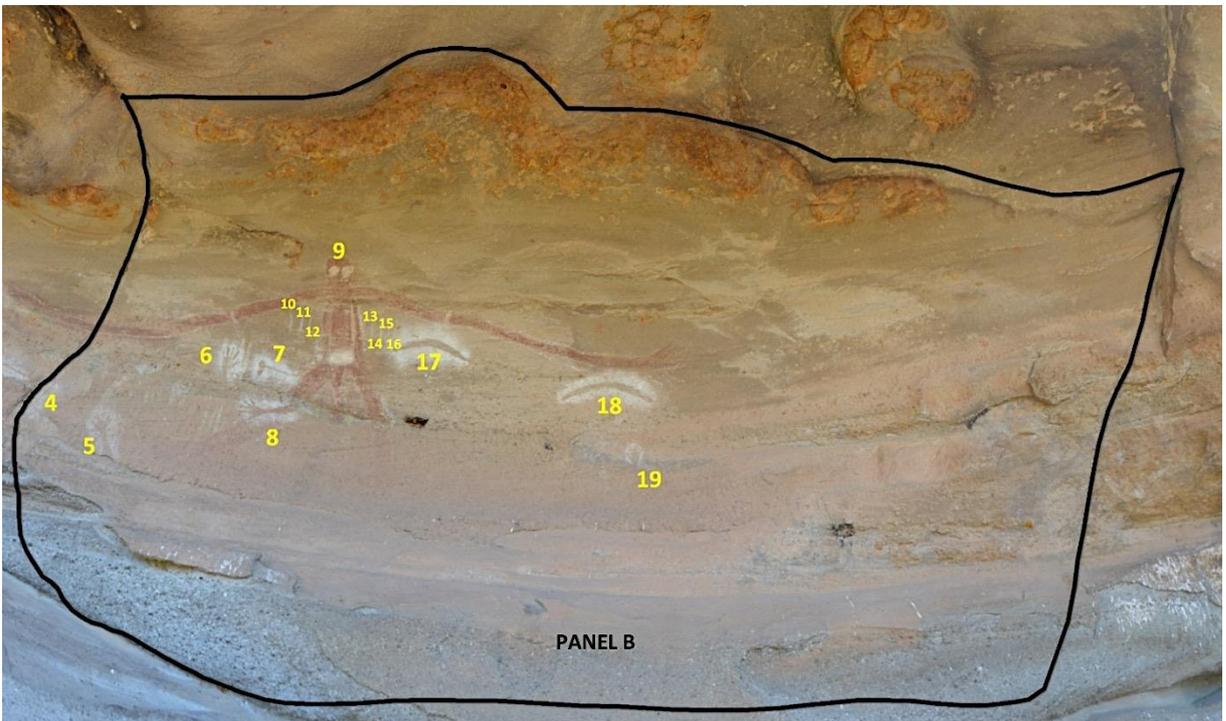


Figure 5: Panel B, located in the centre of the cave. (Source: GML 2017).

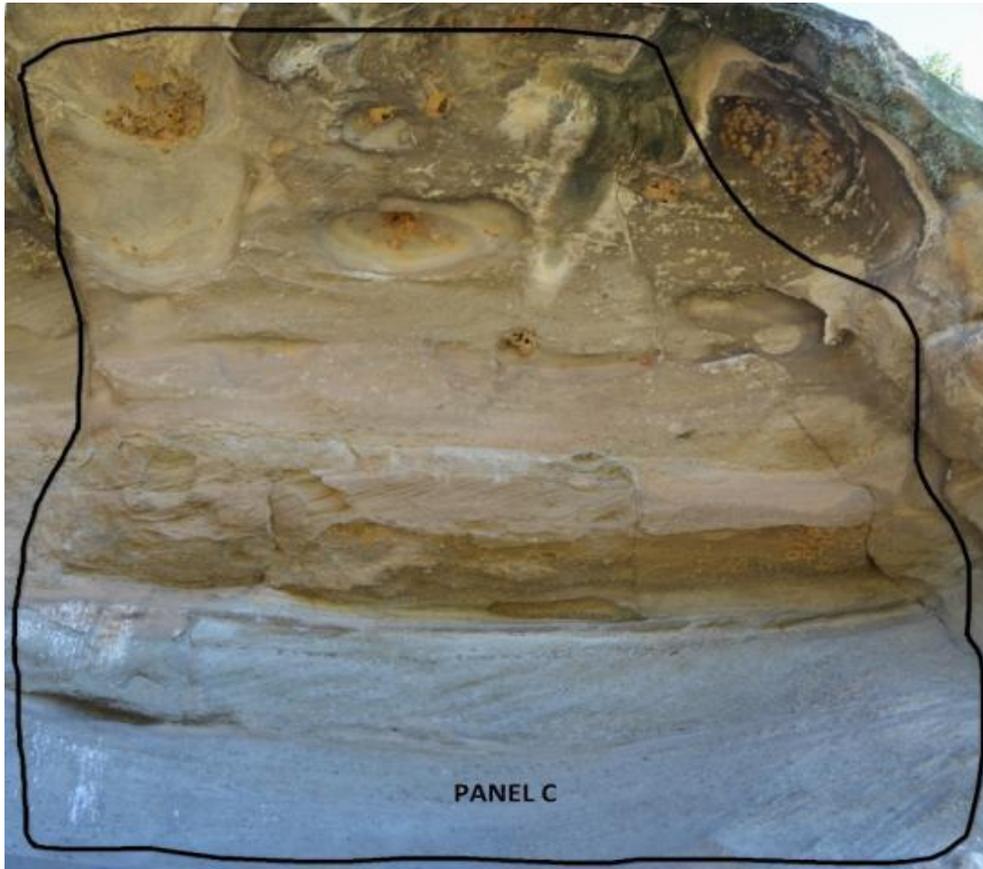


Figure 6: Panel C, located on the right side of the cave. No art is located on this panel. (Source: GML 2017).

3.2. The Cultural Landscape

Baiame Cave is located on the slopes of a low rocky escarpment of Hawkesbury Sandstone. The cave is located on a curve in the escarpment and provides an expansive view over a wide flat valley to the northeast (Figure 2). The sun rises over an adjacent escarpment to the east, but soon floods the cave with direct sunlight, which persists until midday.

The valley is surrounded and defined by undulating forested hills. Rocky sandstone outcrops on the tops of the spurs that extend into the valley stand like sentinels over the valley. A river and its tributaries flow eastwards through the valley. The valley was originally wooded. The cave is elevated and enjoys panoramic views across the valley towards Mount Royal.

The sweeping relatively flat valley floor located in front of the cave may be connected with male ceremony. Mathews certainly indicated there was an association between the land form and its potential use by Aboriginal people for the *Bora* ceremony:

In front of this cave there is a large level valley, timbered with large and lofty trees, well suited for a Bora ground, and I think it more than probable that Boras were held here, and that the figures in the cave are connected with the ceremonies which took place on such occasions. There was plenty of good water in the Bulgar Creek close by, and good hunting grounds all around (Mathews 1893, pp. 355).

The level valley to the northwest presents aesthetic and sensory characteristics. The view into the cave is across a rural landscape which provides expansive and direct views to the artwork within the cave. Appreciation of the art is entirely possible without needing to enter the actual cave. This may be significant in terms of how Aboriginal people used, appreciated and practised their culture in relation to the cave in the past. The second quality is acoustic. People speaking at normal levels inside the shelter can be heard clearly at a distance of 100m downslope from the shelter. Sound is amplified by the shelter and projected across the valley floor. This aural quality may have been a significant quality associated with the place's use. It is now considered to be part of the sensory experience of the cultural landscape.

4. Findings

Weathering processes and natural hazards such as wildfire, flood and drought were found to pose risks to the valley landscape, the rock shelter and artwork. Human induced threats, including increased visitation, vandalism, and coal mining, were also found to present risks. Maintaining the valley and its current landform and agricultural use, within the broader setting of forested hillslopes is considered essential for sustaining cultural values associated with the cave.

The greatest threat, however, was identified as the loss of cultural knowledge. Dispossession through colonial occupation of Wonnarua land and the forced removal of Aboriginal people, including the prevention of the use of Aboriginal language and transmission of cultural knowledge and practices has impacted the Aboriginal knowledge systems. This has been a key issue for Aboriginal people since 1788 when the British Government claimed ownership of Australia. Australia's Indigenous peoples, like many indigenous cultures subject to colonisation, remain 'disadvantaged' today with successive policies perpetuating social and economic disadvantage across generations. The Australian Government is working to redress inequities and has implemented a program called 'Closing the Gap':

In 2018, Closing the Gap remains a shared commitment. It is the story of a shared journey to continue to work together and enable and empower Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to live healthy and prosperous lives. This journey continues to draw on the enduring wisdom, strength and resilience learned over thousands of years of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander civilisation (PMC 2018).

The 'gap' was opened in 1788 with the arrival of the British. From the early nineteenth century, a systematic process was implemented to 'civilise' Aboriginal people and dissociate them from their land, cultural traditions and knowledge systems. In 1809, NSW Governor Lachlan Macquarie was instructed to '*conciliate the affection of the Aborigines and to prescribe that British subjects live in amity and kindness with them*'. The position of ecclesiastical bodies was more direct—the colonial head of the Church of England, Samuel Marsden, had also been advised by the London Missionary Society in 1810, that he should '*contribute to the Civilisation of the Heathen and thus prepare them for the reception of moral and religious instruction*' (NSW State Heritage Register 2018). One consequential outcome was the establishment of the Black Native Institute in Parramatta (1814-1823), followed by the Blacktown Native Institute (1823-1829) (both located in Sydney, NSW); these institutes removed Aboriginal children from their parents and instructed them according to European worldviews. While one needs to read and interpret European observations of Aboriginal people and culture with caution, the loss of cultural knowledge is evident in 1893 in a published recording of Baiame Cave:

I was informed by Mr. W. G. McAlpin, who is now eighty-four years of age, and has resided in the neighbourhood for the last fifty years, that the figures in this cave were there when he first came to the district; and even at that time the drawings were beyond the knowledge of the local blacks [sic] (Mathews 1893:356).

Colonial expansion into the Upper Hunter commenced in the 1820s, with land grants along the Hunter River. The process of colonisation resulted in the spread of disease against which Aboriginal people had little or no immunity, and 'frontier wars', with skirmishes, military intervention and deaths amongst the British and Aboriginal population (Gollan 1993). Underscoring this struggle for land and natural resources, was the general belief amongst the colonialists that Australia was 'terra nullius', or 'nobody's land'. It was also thought that Aboriginal people were nomadic, had no concept of land ownership and did not have an attachment to or sovereignty over land (a concept only refuted in 1992 during the *Mabo* case).

4.1. Aboriginal Reconciliation and Reconnection

Despite the 1893 report to the contrary, Wonnarua Aboriginal people have maintained traditions and connections with their Country, which includes the Baiame Cave. The Aboriginal community, comprising several families and individuals, have described the social and traditional importance of Baiame and the Baiame Cave. These individuals hold specific knowledge of the place and associated traditional practices.

Traditional knowledge and the ability to speak for Country may vary within an Aboriginal community, and this situation applies to Baiame Cave. Given the historical circumstances of Aboriginal people's lives there are often different opinions and interpretations regarding cultural meanings and protocols. This results in different requirements for ownership, access, maintenance, ongoing use, presentation and interpretation. Nevertheless, it is agreed that Baiame Cave is of heritage value and there is a continuing responsibility to ensure its protective care.

The State heritage listing was a direct consequence of the Aboriginal community's commitment to recognition of the place's value and to its long-term conservation. The listing allowed the Aboriginal community to access government grant funding, which supported the Baiame Cave CMP project. The Aboriginal community, assisted by local landowners and regional stakeholders was able to tender the CMP project, define the brief and establish the required scope of work. The need for an external supplier to prepare the CMP was due to the complexities of CMP preparation (and required endorsement by the NSW Heritage Council), coupled with the need to seek specialist conservation advice.

The approach adopted during the development of the CMP was driven by the Baiame Cave working party—with the Aboriginal community empowered to provide the direction and decisions relating to the place. A series of working party consultation meetings were held on site (within and adjacent to the Baiame Cave). This provided a phenomenological approach to the management; when key issues were discussed, they could be articulated by individuals through a process of physical demonstration.

For instance, the current access route into the shelter is via a steep slope, which was deemed by the Aboriginal community to be inconsistent with the values of the place. Robust discussions were able to explore new options for an access route by physically walking proposed new approaches to the site, and allowing all Aboriginal community members present to provide opinions on the merits, or otherwise, of the current and proposed access. During the conservation assessment, Aboriginal people were able to work with the conservator, providing cultural input into the methods of paint application and the meaning of the different elements being recorded at the site—this significantly increased the understanding for future conservation requirements. The planning requirements for future heritage interpretation was substantially driven by the Aboriginal community. Working with the landowners, the project team was able to understand key operational and visitor management issues to develop conservation policy to mitigate and reduce the key risks.

5. Conclusions

Australian Aboriginal people have demonstrated tremendous resilience through 230 years of colonial settlement and repression. Aboriginal culture is part of a deep lived continuum. Returning to Country, combined with renewal and revival of culture and knowledge is part of the everyday life within Aboriginal communities. In addition, Aboriginal people are increasingly sharing their culture and values with the broader Australian community.

At Baiame Cave, the Wonnarua people seek to share their culture and educate others in understanding the land, the human relationship with nature and the sustainable management of natural resources. The approach to development of the Baiame Cave CMP has demonstrated that Aboriginal traditions and understanding provide sustainable approaches to heritage management, which contribute to the life and wellbeing in the community. The Sendai Framework provided a sound basis for development of the CMP, which placed the requirements of, and the benefits for, the local Aboriginal community at the centre of the project.

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