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CONNECTING TO THE ANCESTORS: WHY ROCK ART IS IMPORTANT FOR INDIGENOUS AUSTRALIANS AND THEIR WELL-BEING

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Abstract. The rock art of Australia, consisting of paintings, drawings, stencils, prints, petroglyphs, finger flutings and figures made of beeswax, remains important for contemporary Indigenous Australians on many levels despite cultural, linguistic and geographic differences across the country, as well as hundreds of years of contact with Asians and Europeans. However, the reason why it is important, including for well-being, rarely has been the focus of research. In this paper this is explored, beginning with historic references and then interviews with Aboriginal colleagues in New South Wales, Queensland and the Northern Territory. The responses to the question 'Why is rock art important?' by an international group of non-Indigenous rock art researchers is then contrasted with responses to the same question by a group of Aboriginal Australians equally interested in and concerned about rock art. It is concluded that Aboriginal Australians emphasise rock art as being an essential part of contemporary Indigenous culture(s) associated with connections to direct ancestors and Ancestral Beings, important cultural stories, history places, cultural landscapes and contemporary well-being, while rock art researchers more often link rock art to archaeology, specific sites and notions of things from the past. In order to better manage rock art in Australia, understanding this difference is fundamental. However, the two perspectives can be usefully combined to better inform and support rock art conservation and management practice.

Introduction

Australia has one of the largest rock art bodies in the world as well as rock art with great time depth (see overviews in Layton 1992; Taçon 2011). Rock art in various forms and styles is found almost everywhere there are suitable rock surfaces in shelters or in the open. With at least 100 000 sites, and hundreds more located each year, there are immense challenges to managing and conserving Australia's vast rock art heritage. For instance, many human and natural forces threaten the survival of rock art sites, including industrial, agricultural and urban development (Agnew et al. 2014; Lambert 2007; Marshall and Taçon 2014; Taçon and Marshall 2014), something that impacts on contemporary Indigenous well-being (Taçon in press).

The importance of rock art in relation to Indigenous well-being first became clear to me while undertaking research in Kakadu National Park in the mid-1980s. In 1986, Bunitj clan elder Bill Neidjie (Fig. 1) was telling me why rock art is significant for his people as we viewed a special gallery at Nadambirr (Hawk Dreaming). As he had done at other sites, such as those of the Ubirr and Cannon Hill complexes in 1985 and 1986, he kept emphasising that the rock art gave

him good 'feelings'. It did so by, among other things, reminding him of all of his relatives who had visited the sites and seen the paintings, many now long dead. 'We say "good painting" and then he give you all that good feeling' (in Taçon 1989: 331). To drive his point home he concluded:

Memories, he give you memories. You can't look (see them) but it's there alright. Plenty people, 'oh, lovely painting' they say. Yah lovely painting, but happy. That memory give you. And think about it. No matter we can look painting, but you'll have to think about it. Good thing, you know.

That paintings was there, but you can't touch 'em. They told us; they said don't touch it. My uncle, he told me. Don't touch any painting. I said 'what for'? You'll know after. He read it. What for I said. People (will) be asking you, you'll get sick of it. 'What people? Aborigine? White?' No matter what sort of people, they'll come ask you ... That old man, he was right ... He got good story, good memory, so he's happy. We too much humbug, you know. All this drinking. They don't listen. No matter who. That's why they have, you know, bad luck sometimes. Dying. Because they don't understand this one (points to rock painting). This story; because this good, good one this story ... People that walk away and don't listen at meetings



Figure 1. Big Bill Neidjie explaining the importance of rock art at Nadambirr (*Hawk Dreaming*), Northern Territory in June, 1986 (source: PT).

get bad luck (in Taçon 1989: 332; parentheses mine).

Well-being can be defined in many ways, including social, personal, economic, cultural, environmental, psychological, spiritual, physical. Most importantly, it can be viewed as a positive sense of personal and cultural wellness that results from strong cultural identity. Strong cultural identity is underpinned by connection to places, landscapes, tradition, heritage, shared stories and communal histories. Thus, well-being is here defined as a positive sense of psychological, physical, emotional and spiritual satisfaction that results from being part of a culture and community that actively engages with its environment, heritage and traditions. Consequently, when heritage, including rock art, is damaged, destroyed or threatened the well-being of individuals and communities is negatively impacted. Bill Neidjie (in Neidjie et al. 1985: 49) expressed this relationship of rock art and well-being in terms of anxiety about what might happen to rock art sites: 'I worry about that place ... secret place that got painting there, inside cave. It got to be looked after because my father, grandad all look after. Now me, I got to do same'.

Similar published statements about the importance of rock art made by indigenous people from across Australia and some in North America are combined below with comments from Aboriginal Australians I have worked with since 1985. The previously unpublished ethnographic information was obtained as a part of various projects in the Northern Territory, Queensland and New South Wales. The most recent feedback about the contemporary importance of rock art (since 2016) was purposely collected as part of a major research project on Australian rock art conservation in relation to Indigenous well-being. For this research, indigenous and non-indigenous rock art researchers were also directly asked to respond to the question of why rock art is important. The results are summarised in the discussion that follows. Although

the Indigenous Australian opinions are very personalised, similar sentiments have been expressed by other members of their communities to me and colleagues on many occasions so we can infer that they reflect broader community views.

Northern Territory

Brady and Bradley (2016) highlight this link between rock art and social well-being for the Yanyuwa people of the McArthur River delta and Gulf of Carpentaria region of the Northern Territory, especially the 'owners' of specific places (*ngimirringki*) and the guardians of sacred places (*jungkayi*):

As several *jungkayi* and *ngimirringki* observed, the fading or deterioration of many images in country is directly linked to its kin dying, the health of the Yanyuwa community, or even the present generation's lack of engagement with that country. While at one level these relationships signal the relational agency and/or sentient nature of rock art, at another level they provide unique insight into the potential of rock art in contributing to Yanyuwa social well-being ... By being on country and carrying out various responsibilities and obligations, people's social well-being is enhanced ... People fulfil their obligations by calling out to the old people in country, burning the landscape, and carrying out other obligations including visiting rock art sites. In turn, these actions make country 'healthy' again as well as people. As a result, an affective relationship can be established between people, country, and rock art (2016: 102).

'If you miss all this story, well bad luck' Bill Neidjie would often say to me as we viewed and discussed rock art. 'This one, now, history, history book: good for you' (Taçon 1992: 11). Jacob Nayinggul, head of the nearby Manilakarr people, often said similar things when we met. An early record can be found in the Alligator Rivers Stage II land claim (Toohey 1981: 31) where Jacob is quoted saying 'When looking after the area I also look after paintings ... That is our historic thing. We keep that because nowadays I don't do as well as my grandfather did so I keep that for my children to see'.

Neidjie also emphasised the importance of traditional stories, especially those associated with rock art: 'This story is important. It won't change, it is law. It is like this earth, it won't move ... This story ... this is true story' (Neidjie et al. 1985: 63). He further added:

I don't know if you can hang on to this story. But, now you know this story, and you'll be coming to earth. You'll be part of earth when you die. You responsible now. You got to go with us ... to earth. Might be you can hang on ... hang onto this story ... to this earth. You got children ... grandson. Might be your grandson will get this story ... keep going ... hang on like I done (in Neidjie et al. 1985: 64).

Since 2008, when I first began working with Mawng elder Ronald Lamilami (Fig. 2) to record rock art across his Namunidjbuk clan estate in the Wellington Range, northwest Arnhem Land he has repeatedly said his rock art sites are his family's history books and that really big sites like Djulirri, which has over 3100 rock paintings, stencils and beeswax figures, are his peo-

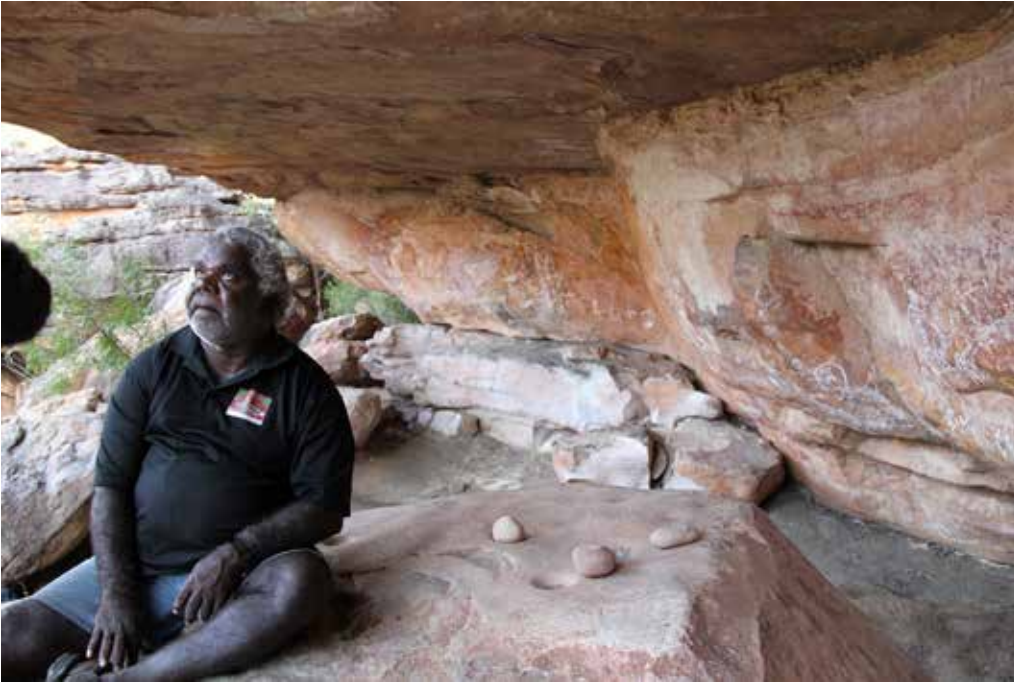


Figure 2. Ronald Lamilami at Djulurri, Northern Territory, in September, 2011 (source: PT).

ple's libraries (e.g. Taçon et al. 2010: 418). In July 2016, he told a group of us 'The rock art is connected to the land, it tells stories ... from father to sons, to their sons, grandchildren and keeps going. If you don't keep that up to date you're going to lose everything.'

His son Patrick Lamilami (also known as Cecil Namunidjbuk) told me in May 2013 that

Our rock art sites are like history books to us that have stories to pass on to future generations. This is why it is important to protect these places. By playing the didjeridu, telling traditional stories and visiting rock art sites I help keep my cultural life and heritage strong for my people.

When asked 'How do you feel if some of these paintings get damaged?' Ronald's second son Leonard Lamilami said in July 2016 'It's damaging us, our future, for our kids ... like a dictionary for us, like a bible.' Patrick added 'As my brother said, it's our future and the future of our young ones growing up and beyond. It is our library. It holds our stories.'

Ronald's father, Patrick and Leonard's grandfather, was Lazarus Lamilami who was born about 1913 (Cole 2000). In the late 1920s, when he was a young man, he travelled from Goulburn Island to Oenpelli to the south of the Wellington Range with four other men about his age as well as an older man, Namuluda (Lamilami 1974: 121) (Fig. 3). On the return trip they camped 'at the top of Angarlban Creek, where there are many caves' (1974: 124) and saw some rock paintings including some high up on rock shelter walls:

I hadn't seen paintings like that before and I wondered how they could be so high up. Then Namuluda told us, 'these paintings are done by *mimi*. *Mimi* can make these at the top of the caves to come down very close to paint. Then when they are finished they say some magic words or blow some wind and the paint-

ings go up to the normal place. That's how it's done'. These *mimi* are good spirits that our people told us about. Still we wondered if it was true or not (Lamilami 1974: 124–125).

Lazarus later visited many rock art sites with Namuluda, including in 1952 with photographer Axel Poignant. In one shelter, referred to as Nararan, Namuluda told Poignant about 'the figure of a Spirit Being painted by his cousin' (Poignant 1995: 4). Because of the description of many of the paintings seen at Nararan we now know the site is the main gallery of the Djulirri complex, a place Ronald Lamilami refers to as his people's 'library' as mentioned above (see Poignant photo in Layton 1992: 91). Namuluda is thought to have been born in 1892 (Mackett 2007: 4). The late 1920s reference by Namuluda to spirits making some rock art, in this case *Mimi*, is as far as we know the earliest known account of a spirit connection to rock art of the Northern Territory. Importantly, however, Namuluda also talks about people making rock paintings, such as his cousin. This is similar to what Aboriginal people across Australia have said in recent times, that some rock art was made by spiritual beings and some by Aboriginal individuals. Ethnographic research on this topic led Rosenfeld (1997) to distinguish three very different contexts of rock art production: rock art said to be an Ancestral creation, rock art that is a human creation about the Dreaming past/present; and rock art that is a human creation about human concerns (1997: 296–297). All three types can be found at Djulirri.



Figure 3. Namuluda in 1925 (source: photo by Herbert Edward Read owned by PT).



Figure 4. Shayne Williams at Jibbon, New South Wales, in July 2017 (source: PT).

Western Australia

Ngarinyin elder Banggal (David Mowaljarlai) of the Kimberley region of Western Australia also expressed the importance of story in relation to rock art: 'I can't go stealing another man's story ... no way! This story only belong here ... one place. All that education belong here to this area. People can respect all different area when he got his own story' (in Ngarjno et al. 2000: 318). Previously he had stated that rock art images have energies and stories that help keep people alive (Mowaljarlai 1992). 'The story in our rock-images is direct' (1992: 8). 'We should dance those images back into the earth in corroborees. That would make us learn the story, to put new life into those IMAGES. The message we read in our rock paintings is like a bible written all over our country' (1992: 8). He concludes: 'BOTH BLACK AND WHITE PEOPLE should understand about the IMPORTANCE OF ROCK-IMAGE SITES AND THAT THE EARTH IS MORE IMPORTANT THAN PEOPLE. We all come from the earth, live from the earth and go back to the earth' (1992: 9).

This resonates well with Wilfred Hicks, an elder of the Wong-goo-tt-oo group, and caretaker for the rock art of Murujuga on the Pilbara's Burrup peninsula of Western Australia — rock art severely impacted by heavy industry since the 1960s: 'The Aboriginal's Bible that's on these rocks ... was put there for the Aboriginal people at their culture time when they were teaching the younger people. These rocks are the carvings which they sing during the night of their culture law times,' he says (in Dingle 2015 online).

New South Wales

While visiting the Jibbon petroglyph site in Royal National Park near the south of Sydney, New South Wales on 5 July 2017, Dharawal elder Shayne Williams (Fig. 4) told me about the importance of protecting rock

art sites:

Yeah. It's important to protect them because that's where our literacy is. Our literacy mightn't be in the form of books, but it's physically manifested into the land, like the rock engravings, for example, and paintings. This platform ... is like a big book to us. And, when we look at it, it reminds us about all the other stories associated with it and all the things, like the arts and crafts, that we learn where that actually comes from. So, these arts and crafts actually come from that Dreaming, and all of our laws — so our ways of living and our philosophies for living in the world in a respectful way — actually come from that story I told a moment ago.

Later, he went on to say:

I think a lot of non-Aboriginal people probably perceive our culture,

and our engravings in particular, and our paintings, as something ancient and primitive that has no relevance today. But it has absolute relevance for us; because the Dreaming resonates into the present for us with real meaning, so it isn't something from an ancient past; it has real currency for us in the present and it has an equally strong presence for us into the future. Everything that comes into an Aboriginal culture's Dreaming becomes a part of it. It's a very big and all-embracing concept.

Well, they are alive: there's vibrancy in these sites. With the naked eye you might think they're just an engraving; for us, they're a living, breathing part of our culture, just like the land is. And they're like our libraries: we go there and that's where we learn about our culture and heritage so, to destroy them, is like pulling down the British Library or the State Library of New South Wales or the Australian National Library, for example. Can you imagine how devastated people would feel if that happened?

Elsewhere in New South Wales, Graham King, a Wiradjuri-Ngiyampaa artist and elder remarked about rock art sites in Wollemi National Park and Ancestral Beings that created the landscapes they are situated in. 'Many aspects of this creation are reflected in the rock art sites, re-enacted in ceremony and passed down to younger people through story, song, and dance' he said (in Taçon et al. 2008: 208).

Queensland

In Queensland there are similar views about why rock art is important. For instance, in 2013 Wakaman Traditional Owner Carol Chong (Fig. 5) of the Chil-lagoe area told me:

Rock art is very important to the Wakaman because it tells the story of our people. Rock art marks our very sacred landscape, and the symbols contain our totems that connect us to our ancestors. Rock art is our record and our keeping place of our knowledge, lore and culture. Rock art is a powerful link between

our country, our past and our people, and we want to protect and preserve it for future generations of Wakaman.

These sentiments are similar to those George Musgrave expressed in personal communication with Noelene Cole about Quinkin rock art of the Laura area. 'Rock paintings are Stories' he said, meaning 'the sites are Story places where the spirits and footprints of the Old People still live' (Cole 2011: 114).

On 19 December 2017, I met with Western Yalanji man Johnny Murison (Fig. 6) in Cairns, Queensland, to talk about Quinkan rock art and his new rock art tourism venture, Jarramali Rock Art Tours, that focuses on taking visitors to the spectacular Magnificent Gallery (see Morwood and Jung 1995 for site description). When I asked him why rock art is so important to him he responded:

Well, number one, it's my heritage. It's my lineage on my great grandmother's side. And I'm a bushman, and I've lived in Cape York ... And knowing that our mob were there 12 to 15000 years ago in that particular area and that particular site, and the age of that artwork, it's just awesome to know that you've come from that line, and that your people done that artwork. It's been sitting there by themselves, protecting themselves, and people have come and gone. A few people know about it. But to know that I'm a descendent of that tribe, and to be there today to look after it, it gives me a great sense of privilege and honour. And it just goes to show that it's a living, continuous culture. It lives on in each and every one of us descendants. And we're so glad that in this modern world that we can do some good things with it.

Later we spoke about how he would feel if some of these sites were damaged or destroyed. Immediately he said 'Absolutely gutted. Absolutely gutted. I'd be devastated, broken, shattered. Any other adjectives you want to use, it'd be there'. When asked if he thought governments are doing enough to protect Aboriginal heritage he said:

I can't really speak on dif-



Figure 5. Carol Chong at a Chillagoe cupule site, Queensland, in August 2013 (source: PT).

ferent states or territories. But I think that we're in need of immediate assistance to put in protective measures on every single major site that is known and that is accessible to protect it. So, I would implore the government, yeah, please help us out. Yes. These are cultural assets, and I believe that these are our national assets. This is who we are. This is Australia's real history.

On 17 August 2017 I spoke to Goreng Goreng elder Michael Hill from Bundaberg, Queensland about why rock art is important for Aboriginal people today. Among other things he declared:

It's their culture, it's their identity. For me, that's how I sort of see it, as part of their make-up as Aboriginal people. It's to restore some of those things into peo-



Figure 6. Johnny Murison at Magnificent Gallery, Queensland, in April 2018 (source: PT).

ple's lives that are missing. It's one tool that we can put back into people's life. So, there's like in every culture, there's certain things that make up people's lives, and if there's a thing missing in anybody's life, I think they're running with one spark plug gone.

One of his major sites, the Burnett River petroglyphs, was destroyed in the 1970s when the Queensland government installed a barrage for irrigation. Parts of it were cut off and sent to over a dozen locations across Queensland. The site was an important focal point in the landscape created by Ancestral Beings and, later, Michael's ancestors came together for ceremonies (Asmussen et al. 2016). When Aboriginal people in the early 1900s painted their bodies with red ochre for ceremony they also painted the carved designs, according to a Mrs L. Hill who was interviewed in the early 1970s (Rola-Wojciechowski 1983: 29).

Australian Capital Territory, Tasmania and Victoria

In the Australian Capital Territory Ngunnawal Ranger Adrian Brown is very concerned about the rock art of his people: 'The preservation of rock art is so imperative. Because it keeps our stories going, it keeps us strong as proud Aboriginal people. It gives us the ability to tell those stories to our young people' (in Hall 2016: 12). After hand stencils were vandalised with scratch marks in Tasmania in 2016 Tasmanian Aboriginal Corporation heritage officer Adam Thompson commented on the rock art's importance: 'They're several thousand years old, priceless and hugely important to the Aboriginal community. And somebody has recently gone in there and scratched away the images with a rock to try and deface them' (in O'Connor 2016). And after vandalism at rock art sites in the Grampians (Gariwerd) region of Victoria in 2017 Traditional Owner Ron Marks from the Barengi Gadjin Land Council described his people's rock art as follows: 'Here, this is our library — this is our art gallery. It warms the heart to know that for thousands of years — stories have been written on rock on sites such as this' (in Waters 2017).

Why rock art continues

to be important to Indigenous Australians

At a Gold Coast, Queensland, meeting of our Griffith University rock art research Indigenous Advisory Group (Fig. 7), on 21 March 2018, four representatives from New South Wales, two from Queensland and four from the Northern Territory (five men and five women) who work at rock art sites were asked to anonymously answer the question 'Why is rock art important?' The responses focus on common themes of story, Ancestors, identity, knowledge, spirituality, well-being, heritage, living culture, Country, inheritance and teaching:

1. Rock art is important because it tells stories that were passed down from generation to generation. It's a part of history. It shows what the old people would hunt and gather and the good and bad spirits were there.

2. Rock art is a physical connection to oral histories and ancestry passed down from my grandmothers. Hand prints with small fingers missing talking about women fishing heritage. Boomerangs and shields from country that we have been producing. Stories of climate change and animals that are no longer. Rock art is evidence they were here and we are still here.
3. Rock art is important because:
 - In many cases it is the creation of our spirit ancestors.
 - It is the spiritual backbone of our cultures.
 - The spiritual knowledge associated with our rock art emanates from our spiritual 'ontologies'.
 - It therefore enhances and sustains our well-being as well as our cultural identities.
4. Our heritage is written in stone. How we connect to Country and read our landscape is better understood with our visual aids of art. The many different ways our Country supports us through its diverse natural resources are embedded within the matrix and myriad of art motifs. Its many different ways of connecting and sharing is what is important to me. As an artist it's a place of inspiration and continuity.
5. Rock art is how my family and I receive, perceive and know ourselves and our cultural inheritance. We are inseparable from our inheritances.
6. Rock art is important because it's our identity and homes of our Ancestors and provided from mother earth. It's our history book but in art form and been here from generation to generation. Now it is left to us to look after it for our kids to their kids.
7. Rock art is very important to me because it's part of my history and my children's history. It tells me stories of what my ancestors were doing. It also tells me the country was healthy, paintings of flora and fauna. Animals that are extinct, etc. So, it's very important to look after and teach the next generations on how important our culture is.
8. Rock art is important to me because it offers me story of Country, Story of people and Story of Ancestral Creational beings. It connects culture and country, it inspires, and explains the past. It's a window. It's the place of discussion, of wonder, an expression of who we are and what we have become. The Rock Art we have in Australia is for all Australians to embrace. It defines our different groups' identity. It has so much cultural information that supports other facets of Archaeology. It brings people together in a profound way.
9. Protect its:
 - cultural value
 - historical value
 - aesthetic value
 - traditional customary and religious values
 - scientific values
10. I'm here to talk about rock art. Story. And we do some story about rock art from Oenpelli Hill at Injalak Hill and I'm here to talk about it.



Figure 7. Part of Griffith University's Laureate Indigenous Advisory Group, March 2018. Left to right: Lester Michael Hill (Uncle Mick), Shayne Williams, Wayne Brennan, Kadeem May, Uncle Graham Dillion (seated), Peter Markovic (observer), Clive Freeman, Connie Nayinggul, Markeeta Freeman, Catherine Ralph, Jenny Hunter and Carol Chong (source: PT with permission of photographer Emily Miller).

Why rock art is important to rock art researchers

At a rock art workshop in Salzburg, Austria, on 25 August 2017, sixteen rock art researchers (eight men and eight women) from Australia, Brazil, Europe, Indonesia, Netherlands, South Africa, Sweden, United Kingdom and the United States of America were asked to anonymously answer the question 'Why is rock art important?' There was also an Aboriginal Australian rock art specialist from the Kimberley region of Western Australia and a Maori rock art expert. The responses from the rock art researchers mainly reflect the past, rock art being an archaeological resource, heritage, history, aesthetics, indigenous identity, humanity, connections to land, past relationships with other creatures, environmental change (Table 1). One non-indigenous participant and the Maori both included connection to ancestors:

Non-indigenous participant answers

1. Rock art is integral in assisting us to understand the lives of those who made the art. It provides a window which the 'dirt' archaeology often lacks. The creation of the art (the entire process from sourcing to painting/engraving is driven by human agency on the part of the painter/engraver). Trying to understand these choices may help us to understand their motivations.
2. An important material which says something about how past people comprehend the world where often no written sources exist.
3. Way of understanding human perceptions of

environment, potential documentation of human experience in pre-History, largest body of figurative pictorial evidence pre writing.

4. It's important like any other archaeological material. It tells us about who we as humans were and how we dealt with the world which opens our minds about who we are now and deal with the world.
5. Priceless, in-situ heritage. Evidence (of) direct human action, symbolic communication in the past. In Hawaii, families trace their ancestral lineage & demarcate their *ahupua'a* using rock art. Reminder that creative ability & varying perspectives and expression = what makes us human. It's beautiful. It has cultural meaning & imbibes spirit of place. It's the work of the gods/ancestors.
6. Part of human history. Can shine light on past not available from other forms of evidence. Aesthetics. Current peoples' identity with rock art, e.g. Aboriginal, Native American as part of past and present. Part of our heritage. Past stories that may not survive in archaeological record. Material culture that may not survive in archaeological record. Evidence of ingenuity of people now and in the past. Evidence of past climate. Evidence of interaction with animals and environment.
7. It provides a unique window into how people see themselves and their social universe through time.
8. Pictorial answers for all the deep questions that archaeology can ask.
9. It presents another way of understanding the past

- other than below-ground investigation.
10. It gives information on the people who live in the area & the animal (probably today they are already disappeared from the area). It helps to re-construct the environment. It helps to identify things that can't be found in the archaeological context (weapons & clothes).
 11. It provides material evidence of the richness of human history. Furthermore, when integrated with other forms of archaeological evidence it helps us to construct meaningful understandings.
 12. A record of possible environmental, ecological changes. Proof of human occupation, existence, connection with an area of land. Provides clues to past human beliefs, values.
 13. Because it not only reflects past societies and enhances the archaeological record but it also challenges our perceptions & assumptions of the nature of visual culture. In my region of research it is one of the only types of material culture that depicts life/events that survives today, that was made for

Why rock art is important	Indigenous response	Non-indigenous response
Story places	X	
Part of living culture	X	
Spirituality	X	
Connections to landscapes	X	
Physical connection to culture	X	
Place to connect and engage with ancestors	X	
Powerful Ancestral Beings	X	
Contemporary well-being	X	
History places	X	X
Heritage	X	X
Comprehension of the past	X	X
Past relationships with other creatures	X	X
Connections to land	X	X
Indigenous identity	X	X
Environmental change	X	X
Archaeological resource		X
Aesthetics		X
Reflects on humanity		X
Art origins/dawn of art		X
Visual heritage		X
Pre-writing communication		X

Table 1. Comparison of most common responses from Indigenous and non-indigenous rock art researchers.

- intra-community consumption. Not documented or recorded historically by a European.
14. It's important as intangible cultural heritage of living Indigenous knowledge traditions that feeds on producing/or inserting rock art in non-Western epistemological systems and gives us clues about how rock art works in living dynamics of knowledge construction processes. At least in Amazonian systems.
 15. Major practice in cultures thus cannot be separated from context as 'art'. Therefore played major social, political, ritual role in its culture. Often found in localities/time periods/cultures with no writing so special. Therefore part of very different context that literate cultures struggle with.
 16. Rock art is important because it demonstrates that people in the past had as sophisticated ideas and understanding as we do today but cannot be replaced. Rock art is important as a reminder of how people in the past understood relationships between themselves and their natural environment.

Indigenous participant answers

17. Ancient history statement. Connection. Identity.
18. Because it was made by the hands of our ancestors. Allows us to engage with them at that place.
When this exercise was repeated in Del Rio, Texas on 1 July 2018 at a colloquium of 23 people from 12 countries called 'Art on the rocks: developing action plans for public and professional networking', sponsored by the Getty Conservation Institute, similar results were obtained with the addition of the dawn of artistic endeavour and visual heritage.

Discussion and conclusions

Rock art sites, sacred sites and other places of significance anchor Indigenous people in landscapes created by powerful Ancestral Beings that are at the same time cultural, natural and spiritual. These places are fundamental for contemporary Indigenous culture and the well-being of both individuals and communities. For non-indigenous persons, including some rock art researchers, rock art sites reflect the past, are an archaeological resource, heritage and history that can be about aesthetics and Indigenous identity, humanity, connections to land, past relationships with other creatures and environmental change. But for Indigenous Australians they are more than heritage places and places of history because they are charged with old and new stories, ancestral connections and meaning. They reinforce notions of cultural survival and are proof of Indigenous ownership of land. They are places of knowledge, spirituality and experience that shape Indigenous identity. Rock art sites are important places for teaching tradition, law and lore. They are about story, song and dance; ritual and ceremony. Rock art sites are focal points of cultural landscapes and Indigenous Country. They are priceless inheritance but also cornerstones of contemporary culture. Because of this, Aboriginal significance has been a factor in rock

art recording and heritage protection legislation in Australia for many decades (e.g. see Creamer 1980; Gunn 2011).

Most importantly, rock art sites are places where contemporary Aboriginal people can directly connect to their ancestors, traditions, spirits and Ancestral Beings. As Charlie Mungulda, Namuluda's son, told me at a Mount Borradaile rock art site, northwest Arnhem Land, in April 2018: 'All these paintings down here are important ... It's the story of my people. They go on. That'll be in my memory until I die ... That's all my memory there'.

Similar views about rock art to those expressed by Aboriginal Australians as outlined above can be found among First Nations peoples of North America. For instance, Nez Perce tribal traditionalist and scholar Phillip Cash Cash emphasises that rock art of his traditional land is all about history, teaching and learning: 'Here, throughout this land ... in my homeland called the "southern Columbia Plateau" there are many ancient pictographs. To us as indigenous people, these pictographs are very sacred. They hold dear our teachings and our history. In the same way, they continually speak to us from the land' (Cash Cash 2006: 143).

Enrolled member of the Spirit Lake Dakota Nation and descendant of the Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa Indians John Norder (2012: 398) argues that for Anishinaaneg peoples of north-western Ontario, Canada, engaging with rock art is important for spiritual health and well-being:

Rock art sites, while a known phenomenon in the region I worked, are typically not remembered in terms of their specific meanings or even origins. Their importance emerges as part of the historicity and agency of landscape. These sites are remembered as places of engagement between people and the spirits, and remain within social memory as places of power where contemporary First Nations peoples can still go to in order to pray and re-engage with these spirits through these places. To encounter rock art sites, whether known or not, is to always understand them as living places because of the images that mark them. There is no mystery in how they should be engaged with other than that they be used and cared for properly. At many sites today you will find offerings left by local First Nations people and others who have learned the way that these places should be treated. What they mean, however, is not a relevant question to the contemporary descendants. As I began, I take issue with those who believe that a lack of remembrance of who created these places signifies a lack of affiliation with them. Clearly, in this case, the importance of rock art sites lies not in its creation, but in the places that they mark and the actions they inspire for subsequent generations who continue to understand how to listen, learn and engage with the landscape through this process of remembering the forgotten.

Although rock art found across the world today had many different functions in the past, for contemporary Indigenous peoples across Australia and elsewhere rock art is an essential part of living culture

rather than artefacts/images from the past as many non-indigenous people would argue. Manbiyarra Naynggul of western Arnhem Land, Northern Territory, expresses this aspect of rock art succinctly, and in the process encapsulates all of the Indigenous views of this paper: 'If you look after rock art, your story, then your future, your culture can still continue living' (in Hall 2016: 16). That is why rock art is important for contemporary Indigenous people and why we need to work together to look after rock art, that increasingly is threatened by a range of natural and human impacts (Agnew et al. 2015), for future generations. As Shayne Williams expressed it at the Jibbon petroglyph site in Royal National Park, New South Wales, on 5 July 2017: 'We really do need to work with people with scientific knowledge as well, so Aboriginal cultural knowledge and scientific knowledge can work together to find solutions to these sorts of problems. Because, at the end of the day, we need a third knowledge system that can help us do whatever we possibly can to preserve these sites'.

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