

# At the grass roots: graziers and material culture in western New South Wales



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NSW heritage legislation prohibits the disturbance of archaeological deposits over 50 years old or those resulting from Aboriginal habitation. Observation and interviews with graziers on pastoral properties in western NSW indicates that many of them will still pick up artefacts when they come across them. The law has not been effective in changing behaviour. Why not?

**A. Good management:** Unlike collectors, who purposefully search, most graziers pick things up when they come across them in the course of other activities. They regard this as best practice. Bringing things into the homestead is responsible behaviour, taking care of objects that are part of the local history and heritage of previous land use. To leave artefacts out in the field to be damaged, lost or stolen would be irresponsible.



Mill slabs accumulated by the fence

**B. Conservation:** There is awareness that conservation is difficult in this harsh arid environment. This places the emphasis on objects, which can be brought in to the homestead, rather than relatively ephemeral built heritage and archaeological features.



The remains of an outsiders' hut



A deflated Aboriginal hearth



Things that have been brought in

**C. Context:** Graziers are concerned with objects remaining in the local social context. They feel strongly about things leaving the local area, taken by outside collectors or to museums in urban centres. From this perspective, it does not matter so much if an object is moved from where it was found as long as it remains in the locality. For archaeologists, the depositional context is more important as it is the basis of interpretation and moving objects is regarded as disturbance of the archaeological record.

**D. Cultural values:** Adaptive re-use is an integral part of pastoral life. Old machinery and other equipment in tips has not been discarded – it's being 'saved for a rainy day'.

It's the same with archaeological artefacts. The problem is that, now, the 'new' value attached to the objects by re-use conflicts with their previous value *in situ*.



Pastoral gear in 'storage'



Mill slab re-used in koi pond

To dismiss disregard of heritage legislation as ignorance, obstinacy or aquisition is an oversimplification. The problem is not a lack of appreciation: most graziers I have spoken to hold strong values related to cultural heritage, although these may not entirely accord with those upheld by heritage agencies. Resistance to change in behaviour is more likely if management policy conflicts with underlying cultural rationales (Vanclay 1992). Understanding local practice is the key to promoting change.