Mawson’s Huts Historic Site Management Plan 2007-2012

EXPLANATORY STATEMENT

Subsection 324S (1) of the Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999 (EPBC Act) requires the Minister for the Environment and Water Resources to make a plan to manage the National Heritage values of each National Heritage place that is entirely within a Commonwealth area. Subsection 341S (1) requires a Commonwealth agency—in this case the Australian Antarctic Division of the Department of the Environment and Water Resources—to make a plan to manage the Commonwealth Heritage values of a Commonwealth Heritage place it owns or controls. Section 341W (b) allows both types of plan to be in the one document.

The Mawson’s Huts Historic Site Management Plan 2007-2012 describes the direction of the management of the iconic Antarctic site for the next five years in order to identify, protect, conserve, present and transmit the National Heritage and Commonwealth Heritage values of the place. The Plan establishes a clear conservation philosophy to guide on-site and off-site actions, presents authoritative information on the significance and history of the place, and establishes a framework for managing the site, including key phases of conservation work.

Background

Mawson’s Huts are located at Cape Denison, George V Land, Australian Antarctic Territory. Cape Denison is a 1.5 km-wide peninsula projecting into the centre of Commonwealth Bay, some 3000 km south of Hobart. The historic site is centred on four timber huts dating from the 1912-1913 use of the site as the main base of Sir Douglas Mawson’s Australasian Antarctic Expedition. Two of the huts are intact and two are standing ruins. The site also includes a memorial cross and plaque, broken masts and cables from the first ever wireless station in Antarctica, survey and sighting marks and scattered artefacts, as well as a pole and plaque marking Mawson’s proclamation of territorial sovereignty on his return visit in 1931.

The Australasian Antarctic Expedition was the only wholly Australian-organised campaign of the fifteen expeditions mounted in the ‘Heroic Era’ of Antarctic exploration (1897-1917). Launched from Hobart in December 1911, the expedition established a wireless relay station on Macquarie Island, a main base at Cape Denison and a secondary base on the remote Shackleton Ice Shelf. Mawson’s Huts are the remains of the main base; the other bases were destroyed or lost to the elements.

The Main Hut combined two Australia-made prefabricated structures, anchored into rock and buried to the roofline in snow for most of the year. It served as communal sleeping quarters and a workshop for eighteen men in 1912. Seven men stayed until December 1913 for the unplanned second year of the expedition, following Mawson’s delayed return from an epic sledging journey during which his two companions, B.E.S. Ninnis and X. Mertz, perished. The other structures—the Magnetograph House, which remains intact, and the Absolute Magnetic Hut and the Transit Hut, which are now standing ruins—were purpose built for scientific observations.

The site was visited sporadically in the 1950s and 1960s by French, New Zealand, U.S. and Australian parties on scientific expeditions. Efforts to conserve Mawson’s Huts began in the 1970s, while
awareness of the significance of the site grew, and reports suggested that abrasive wind-driven snow and ice were threatening the fabric of the historic structures. Early work determined the condition of the huts, recorded the structures and artefacts, and achieved some stabilisation. Ice removal from inside the huts, patching to make walls and roofs weatherproof, and removal of non-historic debris from the site have characterised the work of both government and private expeditions since. The policy of successive governments has been to conserve the remains in situ rather than removing them to a display in Australia.

The place was included on the National Heritage List in 2005 for its outstanding historic significance, and on the Commonwealth Heritage List for its historic values in 2004. It had been registered on the Register of the National Estate since 1980.

The Australian listings recognise the values embodied by the form, layout, setting and relationship of the historic buildings and archaeological deposits. The site is associated with significant Australian historical events (largely Australia’s exploration of Antarctica) and people (especially the great explorer and scientist Sir Douglas Mawson). It is also significant for its rarity and aesthetic value, as little other evidence remains of isolated and weathered ‘Heroic Era’ timber buildings in the spectacular Antarctic wilderness. The site testifies to the creative and technical achievements of the men of the pioneering expedition, and the physical evidence left behind has considerable research potential.

Internationally, key elements of the site (the Main Hut and Memorial Cross) were declared historic sites and monuments under the Antarctic Treaty in 1972, and the site as a whole has been listed under this designation since 2004. In 2004, the area was designated as an Antarctic Specially Protected Area, within an Antarctic Specially Managed Area, under the Environmental Protocol to the Antarctic Treaty, after a proposal by Australia. This designation was proclaimed under Australian legislation through the Antarctic Treaty (Environment Protection) Proclamation 2007.

**Structure and content of the management plan**

The management plan is closely based on the requirements for plans of management for National Heritage and Commonwealth Heritage places, stated in Schedules 5A and 7A of the EPBC Regulations. The plan follows a sequence from description to analysis and policies to implementation:

- Description of the site and its historical and current uses
- Description and condition of National and Commonwealth Heritage values
- Management framework and requirements
- Policies
- Implementation, monitoring and review
- Bibliographical and biographical information on the original occupiers of the site

Much of the technical and contextual information and the policy content of the plan is based on, or updates, the *Mawson’s Huts Historic Site Conservation Management Plan 2001*, which was commissioned by the AAP Mawson’s Huts Foundation and prepared by Godden Mackay Logan Pty Ltd, under a steering committee of the Australian Antarctic Division, Mawson’s Huts Foundation and
the Australian Heritage Commission. Rather than establishing new controls over activities at the site, it reflects and incorporates provisions brought into effect since the previous management plan, under the Antarctic Specially Protected Area and Antarctic Specially Managed Area designations, which require visitors to carry permits and limit the number of people entering the huts at any one time. These controls were envisaged and recommended by the previous management plan. There are no other new impacts on individuals or businesses.

Consultation

The Australian Antarctic Division conducted two phases of consultation on the management plan between March and August 2007: an informal period of consultations with experts and stakeholders, followed by the formal public consultation required by the EPBC Act.

An exposure draft was circulated on 27 March 2007 to approximately twenty recipients with a known interest in and expertise on Mawson’s Huts—heritage experts, members of past Mawson’s Huts works parties and staff of the Heritage Division— and made available to delegates at a workshop convened by the Mawson’s Huts Foundation. In response, fourteen individuals and groups contacted the contact officer. Substantive comments on the plan’s structure, policies and technical details were received from a heritage consultant, an archaeologist, a materials conservator, a heritage carpenter, and the Mawson’s Huts Foundation and the Australian National Antarctic Research Expeditions Club Council.

The Australian Antarctic Division’s management plan editorial committee reviewed the suggested changes and modified several aspects of the plan’s directions and structure. The majority of the comments were incorporated, unless they were mutually exclusive, or inconsistent with the conservation philosophy that has prevailed in recent decades (notably, a suggestion to return the outer boards of the Main Hut to Australia for a display was ruled out). The Heritage Division recommended four additional amendments to the plan to ensure it met the legislative requirements, and these were addressed before the draft was released for public comment.

On 25 July 2007, consistent with the EPBC Act, notices were placed in the Australian Government Gazette, and on the Department of the Environment and Water Resources and Australian Antarctic Division websites, inviting comments on the draft management plan until 27 August 2007. Copies of the plan could be downloaded from these websites, and perused on paper at the Antarctic Division library (Kingston, Tasmania) and the library of the Department of the Environment and Water Resources (Canberra, ACT). The notice was also sent directly to stakeholders: 32 heritage experts, former Mawson’s Huts conservation expeditioners, and descendants of Sir Douglas Mawson; 4 commercial Antarctic tour operators; and 3 agencies responsible for Antarctic heritage conservation in the United Kingdom and New Zealand.

In response, fourteen individuals and groups contacted the contact officer. Nine of these expressed an interest in or support for the conservation work but submitted no comments; three requested information that was not directly related to the management plan. Two professional heritage consultants submitted substantive and editorial comments, which largely called for stronger policy or resource commitments and suggested alternative technical terminology. The AAD editorial committee decided to accommodate more than half of the changes.
On 10 October 2007, consistent with requirements under subsection 324S (6) (b) of the EPBC Act, the Australian Heritage Council provided some minor comments on the plan (which have been incorporated) and endorsed the plan. The plan was approved by the minister on 8 January 2008.

This instrument is a legislative instrument for the purposes of the *Legislative Instruments Act 2003*.

The Plan will commence on the day after registration.