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ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL INDEPENDENCE

# media release

NEW SOUTH WALES ABORIGINAL LAND COUNCIL

## More Protection Urgently Needed for Aboriginal Culture and Heritage

Statement by Bev Manton, Chairperson, NSWALC

3 April 2009

**The State's peak Aboriginal representative body, the New South Wales Aboriginal Land Council, has called for tougher legislative protection to stop the destruction of Aboriginal sites and artifacts across the State.**

A report in today's Sydney Morning Herald that Aboriginal sites and artifacts are being destroyed and disturbed at record rates with minimal prosecutions will surprise no-one with any knowledge of the issue.

The New South Wales Aboriginal Land Council and Local Aboriginal Land Councils have been lobbying for years against the ongoing destruction of Aboriginal heritage and culture, both sanctioned and unsanctioned.

Our protests have largely fallen on deaf ears.

There seems to be a belief that Aboriginal culture and heritage is somehow different, somehow removed from Australia's history. That is unfortunate. Australia should readily embrace Aboriginal heritage and culture as uniquely Australian, something that is an integral and important part of Australia's history.

After all, Aboriginal people, just like Aboriginal history and culture, are never going to disappear.

The Department of Environment and Climate Change has primary responsibility for the statutory protection of Aboriginal cultural heritage.

Despite its efforts to protect Aboriginal cultural heritage, the grim reality is that our culture and heritage continues to be destroyed at an alarming rate.

The level of illegal destruction is difficult to quantify but NSWALC and LALCs are also concerned that far too many Government permits are issued which allow destruction.

DECC has estimated that more than 900 permits consenting to the destruction of Aboriginal cultural heritage have been approved by the NSW Government since 1990.

In this regard NSWALC and LALCs have highlighted a disconnect between DECC's stated policy for the protection of Aboriginal culture and heritage and the lack of outcomes achieved.

For example DECC policy states that "Aboriginal people are the primary determinants of the significance of their cultural heritage."

Given the number of permits issued to destroy Aboriginal heritage sites—often with minimal conservation outcomes—it is difficult to justify the reality of this statement.

NSWALC has consistently advised the State Government through its Aboriginal Cultural Heritage Advisory Committee that comprehensive reforms are required to both the law and policy concerning the protection and management of Aboriginal culture and heritage.

What is particularly disturbing is that legislation to significantly improve the situation has existed for some years and has never been enacted. It should be enacted as quickly as possible.

We need action and we need it now.

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