CULTURAL MODELS OF THE COAST IN AUSTRALIA

Laura Stocker*, Deborah Kennedy**, Dora Marinova*

* Curtin University Sustainability Policy Institute,
Curtin University of Technology - Australia

** Institute for Sustainability and Technology Policy,
Murdoch University - Australia

Cultural constructions of the coast affect – and are affected by – our marine ethics, frameworks for coastal ownership and management practices. In Australia, the coast can be seen as an ecosystem with intrinsic values, a commodity that can be bought and sold, a community place where people meet, a landscape with aesthetic appeal, a productive system that generates profits, a property to be managed, or a spiritual realm that relates to proper order and reverence. Each of these constructions interacts with the others and this can create conflicts over rights and responsibilities. Each construction has implications for who should manage the coast, to what ends and by what means. This paper explores the negative and positive implications of each cultural construction and makes suggestions about which are most appropriate to a sustainability goal. Examples are drawn from recent coastal developments in Australia, such as Native Title debates, the marine protected area process and Coastcare.

Key words: culture, Indigenous, management, sea, sustainability

Introduction

Our views of the coast are always mediated through cultural lenses. What we mean by this is that while coasts certainly exist independently of humans, any accounts we make of them cannot be separated from their human source. Meanings and truths about the coast vary depending on the perspective of the analyst. A scientific account of the coast, for example, may suggest that a coastscape physically pre-dates human evolution, but even as it does so we characterise the coastscape through our cultural optics. All human cultures on the coast have an account of the creation of their coastscape whether they be scientific, Indigenous or biblical. Creation stories often describe the generation of coastscape, humans and other life forms by ancestors and/or gods: the stories actively integrate culture and nature. As soon as we see a coastscape we interpret it. As inhabitants, we tell stories that grow and ramify. The stories and actions of successive waves of occupants interact with each other and with the coast. The cultural coastscape is emergent and is always coming into being.

Australia and its states assert their rights and responsibilities over coasts and the sea according to the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea. In Australia, the states govern and manage the seas out to 3 nm, and the Commonwealth from 3 to 200 nm, the Exclusive Economic Zone. The landward side of the coastline itself is typically governed and managed by the relevant local governments, although this area can be the direct responsibility of state government if, for example, it is a declared national park or nature reserve. Thus the legal status of the coast is apparently well defined. However, there is much left to interpretation; this is the subject of ongoing court decisions and proliferating policies. Much of the debate revolves around differing cultural perceptions or ‘models’ of the sea and coastline.

There is no single cultural model of the coast (Thompson 2007); each model of the coast generates different marine ethics (Kellert 2003) and therefore different ways of interacting with and ‘managing’ the coast. Thompson (2007) identifies seven cultural models of the coast as they relate to property: the Sovereignty, Community, Landscape, Ecological, Commodity, Productivity and Moral Order models. In this paper we add Indigenous understandings of the coast to his framework.

Thompson (2007) argues that if a model is faulty then the ethics and consequent practices and policies that spring from it will be faulty; if the model is not shared by all interested parties, or if there are multiple models operating simultaneously then conflict can occur. Identifying and understanding the different cultural models of the way in which people think about the coast in Western culture can help us to trace the likely social and ecological consequences of reinforcing or adopting particular models of the coast. Identifying and understanding the different cultural models of the way in which people think about the coast in Western culture are, furthermore, imperative to fruitful public participation in decision-making by reducing hostility between stakeholders and increasing the possibility for a negotiated solution.

The aim of this paper is to use and extend Thompson’s (2007) framework to understand not only coastal property but also coastal and marine practices and policies more generally. We show how a range of cultural models generates a range of, often conflicting, coastal and marine practices and
policies in Australia. We, furthermore, make suggestions about which models are most appropriate to a goal of sustainability for coastal environments.

Thompson’s framework for cultural models of property

Thompson employs the term ‘cultural models’ because his research deals with “cognitive structures that are intersubjectively created and shared to a substantial degree rather than those more personal in nature” (2007: 213). He defines cultural models as, “[i]maginative structures that people use to evaluate experiences, interpret observations, form judgments, make inferences, resolve problems, and make classifications” (2007: 213). Importantly, cultural models encourage and order people’s values and beliefs (Thompson 2007). Thompson elaborates in noting that these models are commonly “simplified representations of the world that highlight only selected features of our biophysical and social environments” (2007: 213). What is more, “they are so taken-for-granted within a group that they seem like commonsense” (2007: 213).

The seven cultural models identified by Thompson (see above) structure the way coastlines are conceptualised as property in Western culture. As he (2007: 214) writes: “Each model highlights and focuses on different potential interactions with our social and biophysical worlds”. In the following discussion we employ Thompson’s framework of cultural models to discuss not only coastal property but also coastal and marine practices and policies more generally.

Sovereignty

The sovereignty model focuses on individual autonomy, boundaries, exclusion and privacy (Thompson 2007), wherein a coastal property owner seeks to maximise control over their ocean frontage to the exclusion of neighbours and passers-by. This model is characterised by fences that run down from the coastal property into the sea or estuary as can be found in Australia on human-made canal systems. Privatisation of the natural coastline is not generally supported in Australia where most policies specify public access as a key goal of coastal planning. In Western Australia this includes the Draft Coastal Zone Management Policy (WAPC 2001) whose stated aim is “to safeguard our coastline for future generations while ensuring its availability to all.” The State Coastal Planning Policy (WAPC 2003) also has as one of its stated objectives to “provide public access to foreshores”. It does not promote private, autonomous, exclusive use of the coastline and has a setback policy designed to protect coastal dunes and allow public access. Reasons for not promoting a sovereignty model of the coastline are various. First, Australian coastal culture rests heavily on the view that coasts and the sea are for everybody to enjoy and a family is entitled to spend a day at the beach for free. Second, the boundary between privately owned coast and publicly owned waters can be difficult to conceptualise – whether it is the high water mark, the low water mark, the drift line or the vegetation line – achieving precision and accuracy can be problematic (Thompson 2007). Third, even where the boundary is determined, few visitors or residents could locate such a boundary without boundary markers and this can lead to conflict and confusion, or to an ugly array of fences and buoys.

Community

A community model characterises the coast as a place for social interaction, for the development of a sense of place (Hanson 2001) and for proper behaviour according to social norms of the day (Thompson 2007), whether these relate to states of dress and undress, alcohol consumption, littering or physical intimacy. In Western Australia, authors such as Robert Drewe and Tim Winton have emphasised the beach as a place where coast-dwellers pass through many rites of passage and significant life experiences: learning to swim as children, first sexual encounters and beach parties as adolescents, honeymoons as newly-weds, summer holidays as families, and retirement pleasures for the elderly.

A community model only remains harmonious and viable if people observe the social norms; as soon as the public is seen to ‘overstep the mark’ the model begins to break down. Too many four-wheel drives on the beach destroy the experience, not to mention the ecology, for others and there is pressure to close the beach to vehicles. Drunk school-leavers terrorising quokkas on the West Australian holiday island of Rottnest create outrage and increased police presence. Typically, in many town beaches, local governments have to collect litter from the beach several times a week. One positive aspect of the community model in Australia is that people living close to the coast are often the first to protest about pollution events or other declines in water quality (Hutton and Connors 1999). This can lead to a greater congruence with the ecological model (see below) if governments or industries are pressured into cleaning up a stormwater drain or other effluent drains for instance.

Another positive aspect of the community model is where residents involve themselves, quite often as volunteers, in caring for their local beaches, in the form of “Friends” or “Coastcare” groups. In this case, people are choosing to act as stewards of the beach by caring for resources that are not privately
owned by them. A stewardship model of coasts can be seen as an extension of the community model defined by Thompson (2007). It matches rights with responsibilities and is embraced by the Australian government. While it is a useful and appropriate model in many ways, it is also ill-defined; rights and responsibilities of stakeholders, including “the community” and “industry” are unclear. Should a Coastcare group have sway with a local government because of their knowledge of and commitment to the coast, or are they an unrepresentative group of the leisureed, articulate class? The answer to this question is uncertain because our current models of participatory democracy are ill-defined, unlike the rules for representative democracy, and we are still experimenting with this social revolution (Carter et al. 2004). Currently, the role of “Friends” or “Coastcare” groups in decision-making is negotiated case by case. A model for involving the community at large in deciding the fate of the coast in Perth, Western Australia was based on the 21st century dialogue (Hartz-Karp 2005). The process involves identifying a large, random subset of the population and canvassing ideas about the future in a structured program over the period of a day using experts and networked computers with specific software. In applying this sort of engagement process, a clearer understanding of the community model of the coastline began to emerge.

Landscape

One key motivation of people who purchase coastal property is a view or potential view of the sea. Conflict arises in the landscape model when visual consumption of the view (Thompson 2007) is affected after the coastal property has been purchased. Bitter battles have been waged over the construction of buildings that interfere with others’ views, or with other perceived intrusions. As Thompson points out, the owner acts as though s/he owns the rights to the view; as if they had purchased a view easement over the beach or sea, which of course they have not, although they may have a compensable market expectation. The landscape model has often come into conflict with the community and ecological (below) models in Australia. A case in point has been where owners of properties with views have chopped down, poisoned or vandalised trees obscuring their views of the sea. In Sydney, the City of Mosman and the Waverley Municipal Council dealt with tree vandalism by indefinitely covering such poisoned trees in shade cloth and banners, and in once case a vandalised tree was replaced with a plate steel silhouette of a tree concreted into the ground. The policy is to leave the silhouette in place until a new tree has grown to the same size. This has been an effective strategy because no one wants the silhouette in front of their house. In WA, the Town of Mosman Park, City of Mulumbool and City of Melville have installed ‘shame’ signs advertising tree vandalism with similar effect. In Victoria, the Bayside Council Mayor made this comment about tree vandalism: “I believe we need to send a clear message to tree vandals that cutting down trees in our public spaces, particularly to improve bay views, or for any other reason, is not acceptable behaviour and that we will take appropriate action to deter and stop further acts of vandalism. Tree vandalism, particularly in public parks and open spaces, is destruction of valuable community assets.”

A landscape model of the coast in Thompson’s (2007) analysis focuses on the “visual consumption” of the coast and, although he is largely negative about the consequences of this worldview, he does point out that landscape and ecological perspectives will coincide in the case of people who have ecological knowledge. We suggest that the aesthetic appreciation of the sea should be recognised as a valid response and used as the basis for cultivating a broader and deeper appreciation of the coast. Artworks and other cultural representations can be important here. One example is at Bondi Beach, NSW and Cottesloe, WA, where there are annual Sculpture By The Sea events. Local, interstate and international sculptors contribute a marine-inspired installation, and for ten days a beautiful foreshore is transformed into a dramatic sculpture park.

Ecological

An ecological model of the coast gives primacy to ecological function and connectivity (Thompson 2007). As Thompson points out, one problem with enacting an ecological model of coastal property is that few people value the worth of a coastal ecosystem or understand the full implications of environmental impacts, and even fewer understand what a healthy coastal ecosystem looks like or how it works. (Of course, conflicts exist among ‘experts’ too.) The ecological model of the coast often conflicts with other models. In Western Australia, there are situations where the community view of what belongs on the coast includes, say, Victorian Tea Trees on the coastal dunes of City Beach, or even the feral rabbits in the coastal dunes of Cottesloe. The Tea Trees were valuable because of the shade they provided, and the rabbits were seen as charismatic creatures that children could watch and enjoy as an experience with nature. In these cases, a community model of the coast comes into conflict with an ecological perspec-

1 www.bayside.vic.gov.au/council_3345CBEF3768439E826C7CDD6DC1F054.htm
Thompson (2007) conversely highlights a situation whereby seaweed, which actually belongs at a beach ecologically-speaking, is seen as a problem from a community point of view. Concerned about this reaction among children, Lance Holt School in Fremantle engaged the Year 2-3s in coiling and weaving baskets out of seagrass and seaweed, led by a parent who is a textile artist (Stocker and Netherwood 2006). This familiarised the children with the kinaesthetics of seagrasses and weeds, and they soon forget to think about them as rubbish or ‘yucky’. Similarly, learning about marine animals such as sea-slugs can engender a sense of care and interest instead of horror in young people (Stocker and Netherwood 2006). Through hands-on education, and a relational understanding of place (Netherwood et al. 2006), the manner in which a community values a beach can become more closely coincident with an ecological model of the coast. Gooch (2002) even talks about the development of ecological identity amongst volunteers caring for the coast.

**Commodity**

In Australia, 80% of people live within 50 km of the coast, and in WA this figure is 90%². In Perth, over 70% of new housing lots are created in coastal suburbs³, leading to ribbon development from Mandurah to Yanchep. Ribbon development characterises coastal cities in Australia and shows the desirability of coastal living. People who choose to live near the coast operate under a wide range of cultural models of the coast. Whatever model they operate under, their desire to live near the coast is reflected in coastal property values. A commodity model of the coast is enacted through the buying and selling of coastal properties for financial reasons, where the focus is on coastal properties as part of an investment portfolio (Thompson 2007). The hedonic pricing method is being used to estimate the economic value for ecosystems and environmental services of residential properties, including sea views (Fraser and Spencer 1998). In Australia, the Victorian Coastal Council has reported that the premium people are willing to pay for properties adjacent to the coast equates to around $250 million annually⁴. Ocean views are included in property valuation. The buying and selling of houses purely for financial gain tends to drive up house prices and make them less affordable for ordinary families, thus the commodity model works against a community model. A commodity model also pushes towards increased clearing and release of coastal lands and thus works against the ecological model too.

**Productivity model**

The productivity model of the coast is about putting resources to use for the betterment of society (Thompson 2007). Thinkers such as John Locke, Francis Bacon and Adam Smith laid the philosophical groundwork for what was to evolve from the 19th century onwards into the secular and productivist union of science and industry with which we are so familiar with today (Schabas 2005). This union is represented prominently in the marine environment by the world’s fisheries, many of which are in decline as a result of over-exploitation and need urgent attention (Ellis 2003; FAO 2006). Over-exploitation of the coasts and seas has its roots in the perception of the sea as a passive, standing stock of resources (Kennedy 2007).

The productivity model of the coast is slowly being modified by dialogue with ecology and community models, and is reflected in Australia in the language of ecologically sustainable development (ESD) (Commonwealth of Australia 1992), which has deeply permeated oceans policy (Commonwealth of Australia 1998) and coastal policy (NRMMC 2006). More specific applications of the ESD paradigm include a shift in the framework for fisheries management such as we find in Western Australia (Department of Fisheries 2002) whereby fisheries’ assessment has now includes not only an appraisal of the particular fishery in question, but also of its impacts on bi-catch, habitat, society and the economy. Fisheries’ management, nevertheless, remains more robustly productivist in its philosophy than other areas of coastal and marine management such as the marine protected area process at the national level (NHT 2003).

In Australia, networks of marine protected areas are established primarily with a view to protecting the ecological values of coasts and the sea. They are designed to be comprehensive, adequate and representative with respect to our bioregions and ecosystems. The marine reservation process appears to represent a significant shift away from a productivity model towards an ecological model. However

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coming from a productivity model, commercial fishing interests and mining companies often struggle to have the scope and scale of marine protected areas decreased. Recreational fishers also assert their perceived rights to maintain a long tradition of community access to the coasts and seas, coming from a community model. Indigenous people also assert their traditional rights in relation to customary fishing, coming from what we suggest here to be an Indigenous model of the coast (see below). Certainly, to be successful any marine protected area has to have the respect and support of the local community – it is not currently feasible to police effectively an entire marine protected area estate – ambiguities and tensions still exist in attempts to find a balance among different models of the coast, let alone a fully integrated model.

**Western Moral order**

Thompson’s (2007) moral order model of the coast features awe, humility, wonder and proper order. It relates, as he defines it, to a natural hierarchy in which God, humans and animals occupy, respectively, descending status. Reference to God’s intent can be, and has been, used to justify either the destruction or preservation of a coastal ecosystem; unfortunately God’s intent in relation to specific pieces of coast is unknowable, or at least open to interpretation, if indeed it exists at all. In its narrow sense, then, moral order is not a useful basis for policy or management. The other related but broader concept of moral order set out by Thompson (2007) is that the moral order model of the coast rests on the sense of awe that many people experience when they see the sea, and that this sense is perhaps spiritual in its origin. A sense of spiritual or religious awe is a central theme in studies of the sublime, which can also incorporate themes of vastness and terror. A conventional reading of a ‘sublime’ sea, though first articulated by Joseph Addison in his 1712 essay, is most familiarly illustrated by some of the later Romantic poets such as Samuel Coleridge. His poem “Ryme of the Ancient Mariner” features wild, phantasmagoric images of the sea, generated in part by Coleridge’s addiction to opium (Christie 2006), and tells the story of a sailor who shot an albatross and brought the curse of death on the crew. The moral of the poem is that people who disrespect God’s creatures will be punished. Coleridge gives us the well-known verse:

“He prayeth best, who loveth best
All things both great and small;
For the dear God who loveth us,
He made and loveth all.”

Curiously, Coleridge had not been to sea when he wrote the poem, and when he did go, did not like it (Christie 2006). Coleridge is writing about an imagined, symbolic, universal sea rather than a particular sea with real political and environmental pressures. He helped construct a Romantic sea, which was as much an expression of his own spiritual and existential solitude as it was a marine ethic (Christie 2006).

Lord Byron’s famous romantic poem Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage contains a double-edged sword, a key passage runs:

“Roll on, thou deep and dark blue Ocean - roll!
Ten thousand fleets sweep over thee in vain;
Man marks the earth with ruin - his control
A shadow of man’s ravage.”

On one hand, the poem is apparently written to inspire appreciative awe in the reader, and in that sense could cultivate a respect for the sea. On the other hand, this passage, and others like it in Romantic poems of the day, implies that the sea is so vast that humans can abuse it and have no effect on it. Indeed, the sea has been seen historically in Western culture as so deep and endless that it has a near infinite assimilative capacity such that pollution will be diluted out of existence, and a near infinite carrying capacity such that any amount of fishing or environmental pressure can be sustained. Another feature of Romantic sea poetry was its construction of sailors as solitary heroes struggling with the elemental forces of the sea – the last refuge of the free spirit from the modern world. Jonathon Raban mockingly wrote: “Every [swimmer or sailor] could swallow in the boundless, endless, and sublime and still be home in time for tea and muffins...” (Raban 1999). Our concern here is that while people are romanticising the sea (or demonising it), they are not actually engaging with it or relating to it in a way that genuinely recognises the ecological, social or cultural issues that threaten it.

A spiritual appreciation of the sea, with roots in paganism, Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam or Christianity for example, can hardly be disavowed, and it can certainly coincide closely with the ecological and even the community model of the sea, when all three point to a desire to preserve what is whole, healthy, and well-loved. In Australia, authors such as Tim Winton in his book *Blueback* have sought
to redefine our relationship to the sea as one in which this coincidence can happen.

**Indigenous model**

Thompson (2007) makes no reference to an Indigenous model(s) of the coast or sea, despite the powerful presence of Native Americans in his country, traditions of stewardship of the coast and several tribes’ assertions of their traditional rights to hunt gray whales. In Australia, coastal Indigenous peoples exercised rights and responsibilities over coastal estates for tens of thousands of years before colonisation. Indeed, many of today’s coastal seabeds were exposed during the last ice age and occupied by Indigenous clans. Dorothy Winmar remembers: “My grandmother used to live along the river [Swan River] right down there and she reckon they used to walk right out to Rottnest Island; that it was all sandbanks, way back. They used to walk across there and because Rottnest is a hill and it stood out when there was no water there. They stayed for a time and then walked back”.

Indigenous peoples have experienced and understood the coast in radically different ways to Western cultural models. It is important, too, to note that diversity exists among tribes and clans in their cultural practices (National Oceans Office 2004; Kinnane 2005) so that there is no single ‘Indigenous model’ of the coast. However, amongst Australian Indigenous conceptions of the coast and sea there are some common features including: coastal clans use marine resources for subsistence, culture and exchange; saltwater or sea country is inseparable from the land rather than radically discontinuous; cultural stories describe features of sea country and some names and sacred sites reflect these; and clan identity is closely related to the sea (Smyth 1997). Clans managed their estates through cultural ceremonies such as song and dance, and restricted access to the coast according to season, status of clan member, totem and presence of sacred sites (Smyth 1997). Dreaming stories also affect management practices – for instance Nyungars in the south west of Western Australia do not push beached whales out to sea as they are bringing human spirits ashore (Noel Nannup pers. comm.).

The existence of sea country was first legally recognised under Native Title Law in Australia in 2001, in the Croker Island case (Yarmir v Commonwealth). The rights were limited in nature, however, and the majority of judges did not accept that exclusive possession of sea country by Aboriginal peoples could co-exist with existing public rights to fishing and internationally innocent passage as recognised under the International Law of the Sea; Justice Kirby alone argued in favour of a qualified power to exclude consistent with the submissions of the native title holders that would go some way towards satisfying their traditional laws and customs and the common law. The legal battle over the Croker Island case was a battle between cultural models wherein the dominant model in Australia that the seas are the property of all (see Sovereignty model) was upheld.

An Indigenous model of the coast has temporal and hence moral, if not legal, primacy in Australia. Any approach to management must consider Indigenous understanding, not least because of the connections between common ownership of seas, intimate knowledge of particular areas and of other people who share it (Sharp 2002). Indigenous fishing rights are finally being recognised by state governments and clear policies emerging (e.g. in WA, Franklyn 2003). Exciting partnership projects for coastal management are also starting to appear. One of these is a project operated by the North Australian Indigenous Land and Sea Management Alliance (NAILSMA) which aims to have traditional owners across the top of Australia take control of and collaboratively manage northern Australia’s marine turtle and dugong populations, including hunting them for subsistence purposes. This project has highlighted the potential for conflict that can arise when there are numerous and diverse non-Indigenous stakeholders with a range of perspectives on traditional management of turtle and dugong reflecting the different cultural models of the coast and its animals that people embrace. There has been intense public scrutiny and often opposition to Indigenous management of these animals: people adhering to an ecological model of the coast often object to traditional hunting of species that are rare or that hold iconic status in

5 Note, for example, Haida stewardship ethics relating to the seas around the Northwest coast of Alaska (Jones and Williams-Davidson 2000).

6 Boordier yok Dorothy Winmar, Oral Interview: 2002 by Collard, L. Acknowledgments of Nyungar Boodja. www.htawa.org/resources/visions/Abl_democ.doc


the contemporary Western consciousness. However, the potential for better understanding and learning remains strong.

**Cultural models of the coast and sustainability**

The sustainability discourse is about reducing human impacts on ecological systems in order to retain their integrity. In fulfilling the goal of sustainability, our decision-making must take into account the needs of vital ecosystem processes and the rights of future generations of humans and non-humans to these processes.

Which models should dominate in achieving this goal? We need to see a shift away from Western cultural models that fail to manage resources sustainably towards the models of the coast that are potentially more conducive to a goal of sustainability for coastal environments. Sustainability emerges only when the different models mutually inform and reinforce each other and this should be the main objective in any coastal management policies.

**Conclusions**

Identifying and understanding the different cultural models of the way in which people think about the coast can help us to trace the likely social and ecological consequences of reinforcing or adopting particular models of the coast. Identifying and understanding the different cultural models of the coast are furthermore imperative to fruitful public participation in decision-making by reducing hostility between stakeholders and increasing the possibility for a negotiated solution. We have argued that the inclusion of Indigenous understandings of the coast is essential to the integrity and success of such processes.

Thompson (2007) points out that if a model is faulty then the ethics and consequent practices and policies that spring from it will be faulty; if the model is not shared by all interested parties, or if there are multiple models operating simultaneously then conflict can occur. We suggest that where cultural models of the coast are in conflict, unsustainability is highlighted. By contrast where different models of the coast can synergise and inform each other, then we are moving towards sustainability.

**References**