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“MY SPACE HERITAGE IS MORE IMPORTANT THAN YOUR SPACE HERITAGE”: THE
CARNARVON SATELLITE EARTH STATION AS A CASE STUDY ON ISSUES IN THE
INTERPRETATION OF A SPACE HERITAGE SITE

Abstract

Australia’s first INTELSAT communications satellite ground station was established in Carnarvon, Western Australia, in 1966. Its location was deliberately selected to provide a satellite communications linkage back to the United States for the NASA Manned Space Flight Network tracking station that already existed near the town. Both facilities have a significant place in the history of Australian involvement in space activities, and both have strong constituencies of former personnel interested in seeing the achievements of “their” station publicly recognised by the broader community.

While the NASA facility was closed in the 1970s and eventually demolished, the Satellite Earth Station, managed by Australia’s Overseas Telecommunications Commission (OTC), continued to operate until 1987 and stands largely physically intact today, its 30m satellite dish still dominating the Carnarvon skyline. As the sole surviving ‘space site’ in the town, the OTC facility became the focus of more than two decades of local campaigns to commemorate Carnarvon’s role in the early days of space activities. Different groups attempted to establish a ‘space museum’ in the OTC precinct and former NASA and OTC station personnel vied over how the site should be interpreted, with many believing that preference should be given to commemorating the no-longer extant NASA facility, as its story was “more significant”.

Drawing on the author’s experience in preparing an Interpretation Plan for the site, this paper will examine the various attempts to interpret the former OTC facility as a space heritage site. It will explore the issues that developed as a result of different views on the space history significance of the OTC facility in comparison with the NASA tracking station. It will discuss the confusion that arose in local memory between the roles and status of the two sites and the lack of community recognition of the national social history significance, and the international technological heritage significance, of the OTC site, which has been largely overlooked in a focus on commemorating the human space exploration associations of the two facilities. Finally, this paper will examine the issues of historical authenticity and integrity presented by the “Carnarvon Space and Technology Museum” that has been established on the Satellite Earth Station site by a local space enthusiast.