

New National Cultural Policy Submission

A different approach for remote areas – consistent, reliable and professional ‘support’ for the arts and culture to conserve, survive and flourish

This submission is unashamedly focused on Kangaroo Island, of its own accord but also as an example of a remote South Australian place with small population and large distances to anywhere.

Kangaroo Island could not function without volunteers – emergency services, health support, education and childcare support, environmental conservation, progress associations, sporting clubs, service clubs, industry boards, agricultural shows and field days, markets and museums. The arts is even more volunteer dependent, often last in a long queue of need, and mostly organised by more older people and retirees who now have more time to ‘indulge’ their artistic pursuits.

It sounds as though art and culture are not important to the community. But that is not the case. Art, particularly visual art, is a significant activity on the island. In a population of 4500 spread across an island of 4500 sq km:

- several professional artists make their living from art
- three community galleries operate, two of them for more than 20 years
- one retail gallery sells and exhibits island artworks
- individuals and small community groups make art a significant part of their daily life and get together for mutual education and workshopping in activities such as printmaking, spinning and weaving, acting, singing and writing.

Visual art is the strongest artform and a popular activity. Until the mid-twentieth century a handful of artworks, usually drawings and paintings, were made, often by visitors. Once the houses and farms were setup in Soldier Settler Scheme after WWII (a brutal demoralising undertaking), the women (it was mostly women) took themselves off to painting weekends and holidays to coastal beauty spots such as Vivonne Bay and Stokes Bay. The painting outings were a much-needed respite. As far as we know, these works have disappeared from sight.

Even the names of recent (say, late 1900s) artists who were integral to and much admired by the community, have faded from memory because there is no reminder of their work in a public collection.

Our project, to plan and build the Art Museum of Kangaroo Island, was prompted by two things:

- The art of the island is not being recorded or saved – as far as we are aware, there is no permanent collection focused on KI art, let alone one located on the island.
- Kangaroo Island could not host a major exhibition by 10 island artists, curated by Country Arts SA and Flinders University Museum of Art. The exhibition toured to 13 regional galleries in South Australia but could not be brought home to the island because there was no suitable, secure venue.

Fitting the island format, the establishment association we have set up to plan and build AMKI is all voluntary. It makes the project more vulnerable to those who retain the frontier mentality – the naysayers and blockers of the sort of progress that would complement the island’s reputation for wilderness and natural beauty.

Although we have had extraordinary support from organisations such as the local Regional Development Australia organisation (Adelaide Hills, Fleurieu and Kangaroo Island), Country Arts SA, Regional Galleries Association of SA, Australian Museums and Galleries Association, their resources are limited and spread thin. Twenty years ago, a Country Arts SA officer was available to KI arts groups but the funding demise since then means specific support is, with all the best will in the world, very sparse.

For art and culture to not only thrive but also become a viable occupation in the regions, practice has to be recognised as a job of value, and a major contributor to a region's economic and community wellbeing. Not everyone strives to be a professional artist, but individuals and the many volunteer community groups could achieve much more with support from professional, dedicated artworkers, curators and organisers.

This support cannot be by numbers only; remote regions like KI can never compete with cities on that measure. Organisations like Country Arts SA and Regional Galleries Association of SA must be funded to a level where they can genuinely raise up isolated artists of remote SA. Local councils and outback communities, which face major challenges with tiny revenues, could embrace culture and its wellbeing benefits with suitable support. Only 22.4% of South Australians live outside Adelaide (ABS data) and about 80% of the area of the state is classed as remote (including KI) or very remote.

A different approach is needed in remote areas. One that works on value to the community and arts practitioners rather than dollar value and allows remote artists to be supported as if they were in a large population centre.

Remoteness is not just distance, it is isolation, it is the time and inconvenience for city matters including emergencies, it is recovering from tragedy because everyone knows what happened to you, it is having a much smaller pool of potential leaders to choose from (e.g. for local council or any organisation's governing body). Our artists, school children and community in general, must take a very expensive journey to exhibitions of excellence showing the latest Australian or global trends or historical masterpieces. And our artists miss the reinforcement that a suitable exhibition space for their work would give.

And the remoteness is also within the region. When major catastrophe strikes, the entire island is mobilised but it is a mistake to talk about the 'Kangaroo Island community' as a day-to-day state. What exists is the Kingscote community, the Penneshaw community, the communities in the smaller population centres, the communities of neighbours way out west. They are distinct. Each operates with their tiny volunteer force pulled in many different directions. If your community has 60 residents, the pool is pretty small.

Kangaroo Island artists could be a major contributor to the island's main economic sector, tourism but for now, it plays at best a minor role in the KI tourism experience. Most importantly for the island and other remote communities, arts and culture have a critical role in community wellbeing and social fabric. Health and wellbeing, and education, are poorer than in the city (*InPsych* 2011, 33(5); Gonski report, *The Economic Impact of Improving Regional, Rural & Remote Education in Australia*).

Kangaroo Island is a place of natural beauty and wilderness. Its artists deserve the support to realise and reflect those precious, and vanishing, gifts.

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Establishment Association Inc



Revealing Kangaroo Island art to the world

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Drawing world art to Kangaroo Island