

Message from Mungo

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A story of the interaction between scientists and the custodians of Indigenous Heritage. 70 minutes, Ronin Films

The Willandra Lakes Region lies in the Murray Basin in remote south-west New South Wales and consists of what were once six major lakes and numerous smaller ones. Today the lakes are dry, and ancient dunes lie on a wide quite arid plain open to the sky. Nearly 239,000 hectares make up Mungo National Park. The skeleton of a young woman –Lady Mungo - was discovered in 1969, followed by the discovery of the skeletal remains of a man in 1974. These two individuals are the oldest securely dated humans in Australia. By 1989, some 135 individual human remains had been identified.

This documentary chronicles the discovery, removal and eventual return of Lady Mungo who, dated from the Pleistocene era, is estimated to be over 40,000 years old and considered to be one of the world's oldest known cremations. Her remains are the oldest anatomically modern human remains found in Australia to date.

This documentary is very moving on several levels. The historians and locals who are interviewed present superb oral history. As different perspectives and understandings are gently probed, viewers are privileged to witness how archaeologists and locals struggle with differing interpretations and varying emotional responses to the significance of this find.

The film is finely balanced. Profoundly and equally respectful of the archaeologists and local inhabitants of the greater Lake Mungo area, the footage allows the voices of the participants in this story to tell their emotional relationship and journey, their understanding and their appreciation of what this locality of the Willandra Lakes has meant and continues to mean for them.

The main character of this documentary is “Mungo Lady”. Her remains were removed - in a suitcase – and brought to Canberra. Such was archaeological practice at that time. The film slowly makes the scientists realise that actually, best respectful cultural practice is to return these remains to where they were found, and her return in more recent years forms the climax of the documentary, in a way that respects and honours the wishes of the original inhabitants, and with the concurrence of the archaeologists.

Like *The Heretic* (a play by David Williamson that chronicles the different ways in which anthropology is challenged at different times by Margaret Mead and Derek Freeman), ***Message from Mungo* represents a paradigmatic shift in how local culture, heritage and history are valued** through the eyes of what today would be seen as predatory scientists with colonial pre-conceptions on the

one hand, and by local Indigenous inhabitants on the other hand who feel profoundly connected to the land and their forebears.

This documentary took years to make, but is most timely in its arrival to remind us that history, the past and custodians of the bygone era, deserve respect, acknowledgement and the integrity to be left to themselves. Land is culture, and the sanctity of that is best preserved *in situ*, as is acknowledged by the World Heritage Commission's mission of protecting universally shared sites of unique significance.

Heritage sites in Australia have created jobs and have seen steadily increasing numbers of visitors. ***Message from Mungo* is the wonderful story of how Australia learned to appreciate and value itself.**