Significance assessment of operating heritage object:

Paddle Steamer *Adelaide*



Photo: Wikipedia

Built at Echuca in Victoria, Australia, in 1866 by George Linklater (1829- 1886), the Paddle Steamer Adelaide (PS *Adelaide*) is now the oldest remaining Murray River paddle steamer and is of **historical significance** as the oldest wooden-hulled operating paddle steamer in the world. The *PS Adelaide* is typical of a period when river transport was the only reliable option. During the vessel's long career, it performed many and varied roles. *PS Adelaide* transported wool in its very early days in the lower Murray, before returning to Echuca in 1873 and towing barges of red gum timber, people and general cargo between agricultural and trading centres until 1958. Along with the other river steamers that appeared over time, PS *Adelaide* was essential to the economic and social development of the communities in and around the Murray.

The PS *Adelaide* has clear **social** and **cultural** significance, as shown by community interest and involvement with the vessel. In 1960, local Echuca organisations decided to rescue the *Adelaide* and, subsequently, to restore it to a state representing its early days. It returned to operation in 1985 and has become a major attraction at the Port of Echuca heritage site

where it is steamed regularly along the Murray. It is also highly significant to steam, boating and engineering heritage communities around Australia. This wide involvement has resulted in a more comprehensive significance assessment and continuing interest by people wanting to experience the movement, sound, smell and feel of an operating 19th-century paddle boat, which enhances its **interpretive capacity**.

It is significant as a **representative** example its type, within the historical themes of transport, communication, infrastructure, and developing a national economy. The boat itself is typical of an early Australian river paddle boat, with a round bilge, counter stern and a shallow draught of three feet, with 2 side paddle wheels allowing it to navigate at low river levels and around the many and changing snags in the rivers. PS *Adelaide* is one of seven remaining operating paddle steamers and one of the few retaining its original form and its original steam engine, manufactured by Fulton & Shaw in Melbourne. PS Oscar (1878) at Goolwa and PS Enterprise (1908) at the National Museum of Australia at Canberra demonstrate the continued suitability of the design over time. It is a good example of historical craftmanship and skills, giving it **creative** and **technical** significance. It also has **research significance**, serving as a primary source of information to future researchers.

Its **provenance**, including creation, ownership, use and context, is well known and much historical and current material relating to the vessel and its use is readily available. Although it has been repaired and modified throughout its life, demonstrating its adaptability to changing conditions, economic needs and ways of life along the river, thorough research and significance assessments have allowed the *Adelaide* to be conserved to a known former **condition**. As well as understanding the significance of the boat as a whole, it was possible to identify the relative significance of its components. For example, the engine is very significant, while the paintwork was not. This allowed a comprehensive conservation management plan to be developed and followed, resulting in an authentic restoration. These assessments also enable the development of appropriate operating and maintenance plans to ensure the long-term conservation of the boat.

Although the PS *Adelaide* is a magnificent sight steaming “in its element” along the river, its “home” at the Port of Echuca, with its fleet of restored paddle steamers and barges, railway and colonial heritage buildings and the heritage listed wharf, all provide good context and form a critical part of Echuca’s heritage. However, it is important also to recognise other, less obvious heritage associated with the PS *Adelaide*. An operating machine of any kind needs associated objects such as fuel, specialised tools, special equipment and related machinery, spare parts and operating and maintenance manuals. Most critically, an operating machine needs people with specialised skills to operate and maintain it. Specifically, the PS *Adelaide* requires a Master, steam engineer, shipwrights, boiler operators and inspectors, and many others to create a viable future as an operating vessel.

The PS *Adelaide* is an important example of a former way of life and a flourishing economy in the late 1800s and early 1900s. A thorough cultural significance assessment process has been followed, and appropriate conservation, operation and maintenance plans developed to ensure the long-term conservation of the boat. This gives the vessel great **interpretive capacity**, because it allows current and future generations to experience something of the life of former generations.