QUINTET OF BENEFITS FOR CONSERVATION TRAINING OF PRISONERS

The National Trust of Western Australia has completed 12 conservation projects in co-operation with the Department of Corrective Services which allowed prisoners to learn and complete conservation works under supervision of quality trainers.

This unique approach to heritage practice requires different methods but produces multiple benefits:

1. Providing potential workers with conservation trade skills to meet a need by conservation builders.
2. Providing job skills, experience and work ethics to prisoners nearing release.
3. Quality conservation works completed on National Trust places
4. Typically projects of several weeks are completed in one or two weeks providing cost savings that enable more conservation work from available funding.
5. Heritage places of significance to local communities are being conserved by trainees from local prisons.

1. Meeting the need for conservation trade skills and recognition
Conservation builders have difficulty in sourcing qualified workers with the appropriate skills to work on heritage buildings. Skilled European migrants traditionally met the need - this source is drying up. Locally trained people with an understanding of our heritage requirements are now preferred.

There is a need for formal training and recognition of the conservation skills. Ideally qualification would be within existing TAFE Certificates. Unfortunately formal courses are designed exclusively for new construction.

Our training projects are treated as a typical program of works with normal building site requirements, a client (National Trust), a builder (the trainers) and the prisoners, as employees. These are real projects with normal safety, work practices, work volume targets and quality. So far the trainee’s efforts have exceeded all expectations as to the target volume and quality of work. Some of the prisoner trainees show exceptional aptitude for their new skills contributing to their future employment opportunities.
The conservation skills trainers employed are Applied Building Conservation Training. Whilst there is no formal recognition of Conservation Skills Training a certificate is provided to the participants as evidence of this practical experience and competency.

2. Prisoner Training
A reasonable question is ‘Are we exploiting prisoners to save money spent on labour costs’? A definite no.
The major cost is employment of trainers that have solid conservation trades backgrounds, and the ability to pass on these skills to raw recruits.
The trainees are amply compensated with quality training they can use to gain employment upon release.

We provide tea/coffee etc. for breaks and on the final day a special lunch. Kentucky Fried Chicken is the most popular.
When I absent-mindedly remarked that I had not had KFC for years there was a roar of laughter and reply “Neither have we”.

The prisoners are all volunteers nearing release, and with good behaviour have earned Section 95 privileges to be on day work programs outside the prison.
The National Trust provides materials, equipment, trainers and project design/management. The conservation nature of the work is continually emphasised.

The first 5 day masonry skills conservation training project was in 2014 at Greenough (near Geraldton). Cliff Grange a substantial 1858 stone building was in a poor state with inappropriate cement repointing damaging the stonework.
The trainees received theoretical information, demonstrations and practical experience in the use of lime mortars, preparation of masonry walls, stone repointing techniques, making and using limewash and interior rendering. They completed all external walls and interior render/plaster repairs. The trainees even shovelled trailer loads of sand from the dry river bed to match the original sand used.

Following conservation skills training projects included:
- Several more similar masonry projects,
- Four weeks of carpentry work on three verandahs and
- Two weeks of roofing - 300m² of galvanised iron.
Variations to the masonry work included installation of Helefix reinforcing bars, verandah footings, painting and rebuilding collapsed sections of walls.
There was a very positive revelation of how much the training course was valued by prisoners when they alerted the Section 95 Officers of a hidden drug dealer seeking to persuade them to smuggle drugs back into the prison.

In fact in 14 weeks of training projects there was not one incident of bad behaviour.

Every project experienced good comradery and respect between those involved. One afternoon while preparing to put tools inside for the night I did not have the key for the padlocked door. In good humour the prisoners offered to open it for me – which they did saying “That’s what we are in prison for”.

On every project participants were highly motivated by the interesting meaningful work, and gained satisfaction knowing that they were being respected for the quality of their work.

They achieved all of the goals set on conservation projects in a real construction site environment.

3. Completing quality conservation works with prisoners

Quality of work was very good - certainly on par with standard and at times better.

How was this achieved?

Firstly the trade skills expertise of the trainers ABCT has to be recognised. The company is a registered builder with substantial conservation experience, insurances and can obtain Building Permits where required. Good theoretical information provided in an easy to read booklet with clear diagrams and images - each trainee received a copy to keep.

Sections relevant to current work presented daily and discussed to ensure trainees have a clear understanding.

Each participant is given the opportunity to practice under supervision and work is continually inspected for areas of improvement.

As trainees gain additional confidence they are given more autonomy with trainers only checking back from time to time.

Jobs are also rotated so each person received all round experience.

Secondly the attitude of Section 95 Officers made considerable difference. The Officers from Greenough Regional Prison lead by example – participating in the learning and actual conservation work.

They assisted the prisoners with work techniques, quality control and encouragement.
They provided encouragement, but with clear and firm directives necessary for skills learning, positive attitudes and work ethic that makes a suitable employee.

4. Completing a typical seven week project in five days
A regular conservation works contract typically takes several weeks with a small team.
The large number of participants (around 20) in a skills training project can compresses the site time to five days to complete the same works.
This creates substantial cost savings with administration, insurance, scaffolding, equipment hire, site toilets, security/fencing, accommodation and travel time etc.

The architect/project manager must also operate in a different way.
Rapid progress of work requires presence on site most of the time for immediate decisions. Being continually on site is a positive with the architect/project manager fully aware of progress, heritage details, problems and the quality of work.

The National Trust has purchased multiple sets of tools/equipment and personal protection equipment to accommodate a large number of participants.
Providing bulky items such as the mortar mixer and wheelbarrows means that the trainers can arrive on the job with the majority of tools and equipment available.
A box trailer keeps tools and equipment together and enables easy transport between sites and storage.
Builders complain their tradies ‘borrow’ tools and never return them. National Trust tools are checked off every evening and prisoners are searched upon return to prison. Whilst some tools have worn out, none have gone missing.

The architect/project manager also has a greater role in the purchase of materials prior to project commencement and arranging facilities or equipment onto site ready for day one of a project.

Like a mass production factory – With many workers, large volumes of work are completed in a short time with consistent high quality.
This efficiency reduces costs.
Conservation skills training projects are therefore better suited to one trade at a time and not appropriate for more complicated projects with multiple trades.
5. **Places of local significance conserved by trainees from local prisons**

The trainees receive instruction on the cultural heritage significance of the place and importance to local community.

Local people understand the difficulty in funding conservation and are pleased to see their heritage being conserved. Equipment such as water tanks on trailers, generators and chainsaws has been loaned by neighbours to assist the conservation training. Public response to conservation work by prisoner trainees has only resulted in positive comments.

**Benefit to wider community** – In a report by the WA Inspector of Custodial Services:

“45% of prisoners released will return to prison. The cost of keeping just one prisoner is $120,000 per year. In WA $190 million per year.

One of the major difficulties faced by ex-prisoners is employment. Training that provides trade-skills, practical experience, work ethic and motivation will make that person more employable and reduce the risk of re-offending.

**Where to from here?**

The success of the skills training and conservation works achieved has attracted a grant this year for conservation skills training of prisoners on some of the 18 heritage listed buildings at Central Greenough. These training projects are nearing completion.

The National Trust in WA is keen to continue the conservation training partnership which provides tangible benefits to all involved.

**In conclusion**

I have discussed conservation skills training of prisoners resulting in the multiple benefits of:

1. Providing potential workers with conservation trade skills.
2. Providing job skills, experience and work ethics to prisoners nearing release.
3. Quality conservation works completed on National Trust places
4. Typically projects of several weeks completed in one week providing cost savings.
5. Heritage places of local significance being conserved by trainees from local prisons.

The five drivers of prisoner training above have combined into a team effort that overall produces more than possible from individual components. There is a certain harmony in this working together that results in this quintet of benefits.