



# Ikara – the meeting place

**JUDI FRANCIS**  
interpretive planner



Interpretive planning is all about connecting people with places and helping them to understand the spirit of it. You need to find the real stories to do that, the gutsy stories. And find a way to tell them.

Flinders Ranges National Park is a stunning, high-energy landscape. It has some of the oldest fossils in the world. It's a semi-arid area but it's got the most beautiful creek lines and gorgeous, enormous trees and escarpments. It's just one of those key, iconic spaces. We have a lot of tours going through, a lot of the grey nomads and a lot of people from Europe who love the isolation of this place. Wilpena Station was an old pastoral station that was settled for about 125 years. When the pastoralists walked off the land and the national parks took over the site, there were a lot of old pug and pine and colonial buildings left behind. We decided that we needed to interpret the pastoral heritage of the area.

At first we were just going to do a walking trail with some sculptural pieces but it soon became evident that the Indigenous community who are so very linked to this land wanted a place where they could tell their own stories. And so the project turned into public art, a sculptural meeting place. Four of us worked on it. As well as me there was an artist, another interpretive planner and a landscape engineer. Luckily we all have arts backgrounds.

*Ikara* is an Indigenous interpretation. It evolved after a lot of sit down and listen time. We had probably about half a dozen long meetings with community members to find out how we could tell their story because we had no idea how we were going to do it. We set aside considerable funding for this – most of us are about 800 kilometres apart. We used to meet at Wilpena and spend half a day at a time talking about their stories. After about the third or fourth meeting, the researcher and I began to understand what the story was about and understand the way in which the Indigenous community passed down their stories and their law and their education. And then we started looking at art as a way of telling the story.

There's an interpretive sign at the beginning of the spiral walkway. It explains in very, very quick terms that the visitor is now visiting a traditional Adnyamathanha site and invites them to sit down and read some of the stories that are actually embedded in the sculpture itself. They get into the sculpture and they can sit and take in the views and read a few of the pieces. That's when it happens. That's when they can get in tune with the specialness of the land and understand the changes that have been imposed on the community since the 1850s.

We laid out a grid of local stone to symbolise the division of land into paddocks. And in each grid, each stone is a quote from one of the people of the community. We'd worked together for over three years, this community group and I, finding the strands of the stories and you know, every time I left a meeting I came away more humbled. I mean,

not that I was ever anything but that with them but, you know, you come back thinking, 'Oh my goodness, I don't know how they lived with the changes with such good grace and humour.' I just used to come back to work feeling a bit fragile with what I'd heard.

I picked all the stories that blew me away to go into this grid. Some of stories are soft like, 'How can we expect whitefellas to understand us if we don't share our culture?' and others are shocking, like 'My Dad couldn't vote because he was under the *Dog Act*'. We did want to provoke people. Not arrogantly provoke but I've watched people go to this place and they sit there or they stand there and they read and they come away quiet.

*Ikara* has hit all the buttons. Firstly, the park needed a place where people could sit and think about Indigenous life since settlement and the sculpture is a really elegant place for that to happen. Secondly, we were thrilled that for the first time their story of involvement in the pastoral heritage of the Flinders Ranges has been told and their role acknowledged. And thirdly, the visitors who come leave shaking their heads, amazed.

Everyone's happy.



ABOVE:  
Close up of stone story grid  
PHOTO: LORRAINE EDMUNDS

RIGHT:  
*Ikara – the meeting place*  
PHOTO: PETER McDONALD

