

Submission to Australia's Next National Cultural Policy

Australia's next National Cultural Policy presents an important opportunity to recognise the role of arts and culture in responding to one of the defining conditions of the twenty-first century: ecological instability and climate change.

Revive established an important framework through its emphasis on place, story, participation, regional engagement, cultural rights, and the role of artists in shaping Australia's social and cultural life. The next iteration of the policy can build on this foundation by explicitly recognising culture as part of the social and civic infrastructure through which communities understand, respond to, and adapt to environmental change.

Climate change is not solely an environmental, scientific or economic issue. It is also cultural. It affects how people experience belonging, loss, identity, wellbeing, memory, and relationship to place. Increasingly, international bodies including UNESCO and the World Health Organization are recognising the important contribution arts and culture make to public understanding, emotional resilience, social cohesion, and community wellbeing during periods of ecological and social disruption.

UNESCO's MONDIACULT 2022 Declaration identified culture as both a driver and enabler of sustainable development and climate action, particularly through cultural participation, community engagement, local knowledge, and creative practice. Similarly, the World Health Organization's 2024 report Culture and Health: Culture's Contribution to Health and Well-Being in the Context of Climate Change highlights the role culture and the arts can play in strengthening wellbeing, resilience, social connection, and adaptive capacity in the face of climate-related stress and uncertainty.

Australia is well positioned to contribute leadership in this area. Across Australia, artists, cultural organisations, communities, and interdisciplinary practitioners are increasingly working across the intersections of art, ecology, climate, science, health, and civic participation. Much of this work is place-responsive, intergenerational, and community-based. It strengthens connection to place, deepens environmental awareness, supports participation, and creates opportunities for reflection, imagination, and collective response.

At present, many of these emerging practices sit outside traditional arts funding categories and institutional frameworks despite their growing public relevance and social value. As ecological uncertainty increasingly becomes a defining condition of contemporary life, arts and cultural practice provide important social and civic capacity through which communities process change, sustain connection, and imagine adaptive futures.

The next National Cultural Policy should therefore:

- recognise arts and culture as contributors to climate adaptation, ecological awareness, and community resilience
- support interdisciplinary and place-based creative practice engaging with environment, ecology, climate, health, and community wellbeing
- encourage partnerships between the cultural sector, environmental organisations, health institutions, education providers, and local government
- strengthen regional and community-based cultural activity that deepens participation, intergenerational exchange, and connection to place
- acknowledge the role of arts and culture in supporting public wellbeing in the context of ecological uncertainty and climate anxiety.

Culture does not sit outside the living systems upon which society depends. Arts and cultural practice help communities remain connected through uncertainty, understand change, and imagine possible futures.

Australia's next National Cultural Policy has the opportunity to position culture not as peripheral to climate response, but as part of the relational, imaginative and civic capacity through which communities care for place, sustain wellbeing, and adapt within a changing world.

References:

UNESCO, MONDIACULT 2022 Declaration.

World Health Organization, Culture and Health: Culture's Contribution to Health and Well-Being in the Context of Climate Change, 2024.