

As Minister Burke points out in the Revive Consultation document: ‘arts and culture are not a luxury, they are essential to our economy, our wellbeing, and our sense of belonging’ (p. 2). Our identity should also be added to that list. Access to culture brings an understanding of ourselves and our history and is a foundational enabler for cultural practitioners to continue this expression. It is fundamental to our human agency and our wellbeing (Sen 1993, p. 31). That’s why it is critical for the National Cultural Policy to support the conservation and access to culture in all its forms across Australia, including First Peoples’ cultural heritage, often located in remote communities.

Safekeeping of First Peoples’ cultural heritage — including function and access, not just materials — is even more important in these times of increasing climate risks. Many art centres are located in remote communities that are particularly vulnerable to climate threats. For example, increased heat, sea level rises, flooding, and severe cyclones are forecast for the Monsoonal North West, or tropical ‘top end’ of Australia (see projections based on an intermediate emissions scenario in Moise et al., 2015). Furthermore, when First Peoples’ culture is strong and knowledge is preserved, this can help to better inform responses to climate threats and changes (NESP ESCC, 2021, p. 3; Sloggett & Scott 2022, p.42).

There is a real opportunity for a national approach to coordinate this safekeeping of our national collection. The idea of a national collection, as mentioned in Revive (p. 38), needs expanding to include the distributed national collection that exists, often at risk, in First Peoples’ art centres.

CHALLENGE 1: Recognise the ongoing, living culture and laws embodied in First Peoples’ art and the importance of conserving an authentic cultural authority

Under Pillar 1, the policy states:

First Nations artists and cultural practitioners are producing some of the finest artistic works emerging from Australia. The cultural value of this work is widely recognised. Support for visual arts practice and other art forms through First Nations arts centres provides a safe space for knowledge sharing, and also creates economic and social benefits for communities. (p. 30)

However, this only tells a small part of the story. Rather than being merely a ‘safe space for knowledge sharing’, art centres are vital conduits of First Peoples’ living culture, laws, ways of being, and are centres of cultural authority (Janke, 2021, p. 65). First Peoples’ cultural practice informs identity and these ways of being, not just art production with ‘cultural value’ that is ‘widely recognised’.

One of the ten underpinning principles of the policy is: ‘Arts and culture are generative (creating new works and supporting emerging artists) and preservative (protecting heritage and conserving cultural memory)’ (p. 19). However, this speaks of ‘cultural memory’ like it is in the past, rather than an ongoing practice. Some long distant past is not the focus of First Peoples’ conservation of culture and heritage, rather it is essential to maintaining access to verifiable, authentic, cultural authorities. This cultural

authority relies on intellectual property protection and data sovereignty which is enabled by the preservation of culture and knowledge (Thorpe, 2025, p. 89).

OPPORTUNITY 1: *Recognise and support the role of cultural conservation in First Peoples' cultural authority, laws and ways of being, in addition to cultural practice, intellectual property and art production.*

CHALLENGE 2: Address inequities in access to culture and expand the concept of a national collection

Under Pillar 1, policy actions include:

Provide \$80.0 million to establish a National Aboriginal Art Gallery in Alice Springs to celebrate First Nations storytelling and cultural expression.

Provide \$50.0 million, in partnership with the Western Australian Government, towards the establishment of a world-class Aboriginal Cultural Centre in Perth to showcase and celebrate First Nations arts and cultures. (p. 28)

While these new galleries would provide access to First Peoples' culture for those living near the cities of Perth and Alice Springs, they do not put the investment where it is needed most – in the many remote communities that also need access to their cultural heritage. This type of investment in bigger city projects reinforces inequities in ongoing access to culture, brought about by an inequitable distribution of resources for its conservation in regional and remote areas (Meredith et al., 2019, p. 1309).

Rather than a focus on 'showcasing' First Peoples' arts in the cities, as part of a 'national narrative', a shift towards a more distributed model is required for our national narrative and collection. The policy states, in Pillar 2: A place for every story: 'All Australians benefit when they are represented by and in the nation's stories and that they can hear their own voices resounding in the national narrative' (p. 38). However, there is a real opportunity here for the policy to champion a more distributed conceptualisation of a national narrative (Ormond-Parker & Sloggett, 2021, p. 207). It is very important to hear our own voices in our own stories, but these exist in pockets of diverse collections across the country. In some cases these stories are not for sharing with a broader public, sometimes they are stories that require specific cultural authority – not everything is part of a singular national narrative.

OPPORTUNITY 2: *Ensure a more equitable distribution of cultural resources, including an increase in funding for regional and remote areas to reflect our distributed national collection.*

CHALLENGE 3: Address inequities in fit-for-purpose cultural infrastructure and conservation resources

The policy recognises the 'rich holdings of cultural material' (p. 75) that exist in smaller institutions across the country and that these resources in First Peoples' cultural organisations 'benefit all Australians' (p. 25). It also cites the importance of addressing risks to these significant collections: 'At-risk First Nations cultural material must be preserved for future generations' (p. 75). However, there are no actions proposed to address this need. This highlights a pressing opportunity for a national plan for

safekeeping and the infrastructure, resources and training required to support this. Further research and investment to enable this is essential, as well as broader thinking about what constitutes our national collection.

Cultural conservation resources and infrastructure need to be tailored to the individual needs of First Peoples' cultural centres. They need to be fit-for-purpose and designed to withstand climate extremes, given that many are located in communities experiencing an increase in climate-related and other risks (Cresswell et al., 2021). The infrastructure in these cultural centres is often not fit-for-purpose for adequate safekeeping and securing of ongoing access to significant cultural materials and practices (Scott, 2017, p. 19). This inequity is inherent in the design, and albeit, good intentions of the Sharing the National Collection program which has been run by the National Gallery of Australia (NGA) with the aim of allowing 'long-term loans of works of art to suburban and regional galleries' (p. 75). This is a great way to share more of the institutional collections but also highlights the inequity in infrastructure for different communities. As the NGA states on its website for this program, specific conditions are required to house works from the national collection: 'Each work of art will require a specific set of conditions to ensure its safety while on loan' (NGA 2023). Many art centres in remote First Peoples' communities would not meet these criteria as outlined, for example, in the Australian Institute for the Conservation of Cultural Materials (AICCM) Environmental Standards (AICCM, 2022).

Revive's support for the AIATSIS Central Australia Engagement and Digitisation Centre in Mparntwe / Alice Springs (p. 76) is a great example of investing in conservation and training, but digitisation is only one part of tackling the conservation challenges in First Peoples' art centres. In other instances, material, not digital, conservation resources and infrastructure are required. For example, there is a need to support local infrastructure to house cultural collections and enable repatriation. For many First Peoples, cultural heritage objects are also considered ancestors, or a direct line to them (see the section on possum cloaks in Bennion & Kelly-Mundine 2021, p. 177). Infrastructure is essential to enabling more repatriation which is sometimes prevented by inadequate storage facilities (Scott 2017, p. 16), but also the safeguarding of existing cultural heritage held by communities. Access and preservation of archives is also critical so that information is preserved to link to communities and enable repatriation pathways (Fforde et al., 2015, p. 39).

OPPORTUNITY 3: Support the funding of fit-for-purpose cultural infrastructure in First Peoples' cultural centres.

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