

SUBMISSION TO THE NATIONAL CULTURAL POLICY

Recognising Intangible Cultural Heritage, Cultural Participation and Climate Resilience in Australia’s Cultural Future

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Woodfordia submits that Australia's National Cultural Policy should explicitly recognise **intangible cultural heritage** as a foundational part of the nation's cultural life, consistent with UNESCO frameworks and international best practice.

Culture lives not only in institutions, collections and creative industries, but also in the shared practices, gatherings, stories, songs, rituals, ecological knowledge, skills and intergenerational exchanges through which communities create meaning and belonging.

The Woodford Folk Festival demonstrates the importance of festivals and cultural gatherings as living cultural infrastructure, places where culture is not simply presented, but actively practised, transmitted and renewed through participation.

This submission argues that national cultural policy should:

- recognise intangible cultural heritage as a core component of Australian cultural life;
- acknowledge festivals and cultural gatherings as essential cultural infrastructure;
- support community-led cultural transmission and participation;
- strengthen support for First Nations cultural continuity and authority;
- broaden definitions of cultural value beyond economic measures alone;
- and recognise the role of arts and cultural organisations in responding to climate change, community resilience and ecological transition.

Climate change is not only an environmental challenge, but also a cultural and social one. Cultural organisations play an important role in helping communities respond creatively and collectively to ecological instability, social fragmentation and economic uncertainty.

Woodfordia recommends the establishment of dedicated sustainability and climate investment within the arts and cultural sector to support long-term decarbonisation, adaptation and environmental leadership.

A National Cultural Policy that embraces intangible cultural heritage would better reflect the richness of Australian cultural life and strengthen the cultural resilience of future generations.

INTRODUCTION

Woodfordia welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the development of Australia's National Cultural Policy.

For nearly four decades, Woodfordia has developed and sustained one of Australia's largest participatory cultural gatherings, supporting artists, volunteers, communities, intergenerational exchange and cultural practice across music, storytelling, craft, environmental learning, ceremony and community life. The organisation's ongoing work provides a contemporary example of intangible cultural heritage being actively practised, transmitted and renewed within Australian cultural life.

Through the Woodford Folk Festival, Woodfordia has created a living cultural space where music, storytelling, ritual, performance, ecological knowledge, craft, food traditions, ceremony, dialogue and intergenerational exchange are actively practised and shared. The Festival exists not simply as entertainment, but as a living site of cultural participation, transmission and renewal.

Woodfordia submits that Australia's National Cultural Policy should explicitly recognise and support intangible cultural heritage as a foundational dimension of cultural life.

Culture does not live only in collections, institutions or the creative industries. It also lives in the practices, gatherings, stories, songs, skills, languages, ceremonies and communal experiences through which people create meaning together and pass knowledge between generations.

Culture is also shaped through people's ongoing relationships with place, environment, memory and community.

As folklorist and cultural researcher [REDACTED] observed during earlier national cultural policy discussions, "a national cultural policy is not only concerned with the creative arts, but with culture in its widest forms."

Australia's cultural future depends not only on preserving objects, but on sustaining living cultural processes.

This submission primarily relates to the policy themes of:

- *First Nations First;*
- *A Place for Every Story;*
- *Strong Cultural Infrastructure;*
- and cultural participation as a public good.

INTANGIBLE CULTURAL HERITAGE: AN INTERNATIONAL FRAMEWORK

International recognition of living cultural traditions has evolved over several decades, including through UNESCO's 1989 Recommendation on the Safeguarding of Traditional Culture and Folklore, which helped lay the groundwork for the later 2003 Convention on Intangible Cultural Heritage.

The 2003 UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage defines intangible cultural heritage as:

"the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills, as well as the instruments, objects, artefacts and cultural spaces associated therewith, that communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals recognise as part of their cultural heritage."

The Convention recognises that intangible cultural heritage is:

- living and evolving;
- community-generated and community-held;
- transmitted across generations;
- central to identity, belonging and social cohesion;
- inseparable from cultural participation and cultural spaces.

UNESCO identifies examples including:

- oral traditions and storytelling;
- performing arts;
- social practices, rituals and festive events;
- knowledge concerning nature and the universe;
- traditional craftsmanship;
- cultural gatherings and communal practices.

Importantly, UNESCO frames safeguarding not as freezing culture in time, but as enabling communities to continue practising, adapting and transmitting culture in contemporary life.

While Australia is not currently a State Party to the 2003 UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, the Convention nevertheless provides a valuable international framework for recognising and supporting living cultural practice.

Recent Australian cultural policy developments, particularly the emphasis on *First Nations First*, already reflect many of these principles through recognition of cultural authority, intergenerational knowledge transmission, language, ceremony and continuing cultural connection.

Australia has also previously examined these issues through the 1987 national inquiry *Folklife: Our Living Heritage*, which identified the importance of safeguarding Australia's living cultural traditions, community practices and folk arts. Many of the concerns identified by that inquiry, including the need to support cultural transmission, documentation, access and community participation, remain relevant today.

At present, however, Australia does not yet have a comprehensive national framework specifically dedicated to the recognition and safeguarding of intangible cultural heritage across the broader cultural landscape.

Across Australia, communities, festivals and cultural organisations are already doing this work, sustaining living traditions, participatory culture, ecological knowledge, communal ritual, artistic exchange and intergenerational transmission.

The sustainability of living culture depends on ongoing participation and shared custodianship across communities, artists, cultural organisations and public institutions.

Institutions such as Woodfordia demonstrate the continuing relevance and public value of intangible cultural heritage within contemporary Australian life.

Australia's National Cultural Policy therefore presents an important opportunity to further strengthen recognition of living culture as a foundational dimension of national cultural life.

WHY INTANGIBLE CULTURAL HERITAGE MATTERS IN AUSTRALIA

Australia is a culturally diverse nation whose identity is continually shaped through shared practices, gatherings, artistic expression and community traditions.

Australia's recent national cultural policy directions have made important contributions toward recognising culture as living practice rather than solely as institutional or commercial production.

In particular, the emphasis on *First Nations First* has acknowledged the central importance of cultural authority, intergenerational knowledge transmission, language, ceremony and continuing cultural connection. These principles strongly align with international understandings of intangible cultural heritage.

Importantly, intangible cultural heritage is not static or nostalgic. It is *living, contemporary, diverse and continually evolving through participation, adaptation and transmission*.

It exists not only in inherited traditions, but in the ongoing cultural practices through which First Nations communities, migrant communities and diverse Australian communities create meaning, identity and belonging in contemporary life.

This shift reflects a broader understanding of culture as something communities actively practise and sustain.

At the same time, many forms of intangible cultural heritage across Australian life remain only partially recognised within existing policy and funding frameworks.

Much of what sustains cultural continuity still occurs through community participation, volunteer practice, festivals, local traditions, oral exchange, ecological knowledge, social ritual and intergenerational gathering.

Many current cultural frameworks continue to focus predominantly on:

- institutions;
- infrastructure;
- collections;
- commercial and performative creative output;
- economic metrics.

These are important. However, they do not fully account for the living cultural ecosystems through which culture is created, experienced and passed on.

Cultural heritage is not only the things we preserve, but the living practices through which communities continue to create meaning together.

Intangible cultural heritage includes:

- community festivals;
- folk traditions;
- oral histories;
- local music cultures;
- ecological and agricultural knowledge;
- communal rituals;
- volunteer cultural practice;
- intergenerational mentoring;
- participatory arts;
- cultural gathering spaces;
- migrant cultural traditions;
- language communities;
- food traditions and communal cooking;
- seasonal and community celebrations;
- grassroots creative exchange.

These practices strengthen:

- social cohesion;
- community resilience;
- intergenerational connection;
- regional identity;
- wellbeing and belonging;
- democratic participation;
- environmental awareness;
- cultural continuity.

Many forms of intangible cultural heritage also carry ecological knowledge and place-based practices developed through long relationships between communities and their environments. At a time of increasing environmental instability and climate disruption, these cultural practices can contribute to resilience, stewardship and renewed connection between people and place.

At a time of increasing social fragmentation and digital isolation, communal cultural experiences are more important than ever.

In an era increasingly shaped by artificial intelligence and digital mediation, opportunities for embodied human connection, collective participation and shared cultural experience become increasingly important to social wellbeing and cultural continuity.

THE ROLE OF FESTIVALS AS LIVING CULTURAL INFRASTRUCTURE

Festivals are often discussed primarily through tourism or economic frameworks. While festivals generate substantial economic activity, their deeper cultural function is being frequently overlooked in recent years.

Australia has a long history of community-based cultural practice expressed through music, storytelling, local gatherings, collective celebration, craft, environmental knowledge and participatory artistic practice across First Nations, migrant and community traditions. Folk festivals and community cultural movements have played an important role in sustaining these traditions while continually adapting them within contemporary Australian life.

Woodfordia exists within this broader continuum of living cultural practice, not as a museum of fixed traditions, but as a dynamic space where culture continues to evolve through participation, exchange and shared experience.

The Woodford Folk Festival demonstrates how festivals can operate as living systems of intangible cultural heritage.

Each year, Woodfordia becomes a temporary cultural village where thousands of people participate in:

- music and dance traditions;
- storytelling;
- ceremony and ritual;
- craft practices;
- environmental learning;
- community dialogue;
- intergenerational exchange;
- collaborative artistic creation;
- participatory cultural experiences.

The Festival creates conditions for cultural transmission rather than passive consumption.

Professional artists, cultural workers and community practitioners all contribute to these living cultural ecosystems.

Artists and audiences interact directly. Knowledge is shared informally and experientially. Communities gather across generations and backgrounds. Emerging artists learn alongside established practitioners. Volunteers contribute meaningfully to a collective cultural undertaking.

These experiences cannot be reduced to ticket sales or event attendance statistics. Their value lies in sustaining living culture.

Festivals such as Woodford Folk Festival function as:

- cultural ecosystems;
- community learning environments;
- incubators of creativity;
- spaces of democratic participation;
- places of innovation;
- sites of social cohesion;

- custodians of evolving cultural traditions.

They also contribute significantly to the cultural vitality and resilience of regional communities.

National cultural policy should recognise these roles explicitly.

CULTURE, CLIMATE AND COMMUNITY RESILIENCE

Climate change is not only an environmental challenge. It is also a cultural challenge.

As communities face increasing ecological instability, displacement, economic pressure and social fragmentation, cultural practices and gathering spaces become increasingly important sources of resilience, connection and collective adaptation.

Intangible cultural heritage carries:

- ecological knowledge;
- place-based practices;
- intergenerational wisdom;
- community care structures;
- participatory traditions;
- collective meaning-making.

Culture helps communities understand change, respond to uncertainty and maintain continuity through disruption.

Festivals and cultural gatherings can model sustainable futures by:

- demonstrating low-impact event practices;
- supporting local economies and circular systems;
- strengthening social cohesion;
- encouraging ecological awareness and behavioural change;
- creating spaces for dialogue, learning and collective imagination.

Across the cultural sector, many organisations are already investing in renewable energy, waste reduction, circular systems and environmentally responsible event practices, often without dedicated long-term policy support. These efforts demonstrate both the sector's willingness to lead and the opportunity for cultural policy to support more coordinated and sustained environmental transition.

Woodfordia has long recognised the interconnected relationship between culture, community and ecology. Environmental responsibility is not separate from cultural practice, but part of the conditions that allow culture and community to endure.

Safeguarding intangible cultural heritage is inseparable from safeguarding the ecological and social conditions that allow communities to gather, create, remember and belong.

National cultural policy should recognise the role of arts and cultural organisations in supporting climate resilience, environmental stewardship and community adaptation.

FIRST NATIONS CULTURAL KNOWLEDGE AND CULTURAL AUTHORITY

Any discussion of intangible cultural heritage in Australia must place First Nations peoples at its centre.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures represent the world's oldest continuing living cultures and embody profound systems of knowledge, language, ceremony, ecological understanding and custodianship.

National cultural policy should prioritise:

- First Nations cultural authority;
- protection of language and oral traditions;
- support for ceremony and cultural transmission;
- community-controlled cultural practice;
- safeguarding of knowledge systems;
- long-term investment in intergenerational continuity.

This work must be led by First Nations communities themselves in their contemporary form.

Woodfordia recognises the importance of creating respectful cultural spaces in which First Nations artists, Elders and communities can share culture on their own terms and within frameworks of consent, authority and reciprocity.

CULTURAL PARTICIPATION AS PUBLIC GOOD

Cultural participation should be understood not only as consumption of artistic product, but as active involvement in cultural life.

Participation is central to intangible cultural heritage.

People sustain culture by:

- singing together;
- dancing together;
- volunteering;
- gathering;
- sharing stories;
- making things;
- teaching;
- mentoring;
- celebrating;
- grieving;
- commemorating;
- learning from place and from one another.

These activities strengthen the social fabric in ways that extend far beyond the arts sector.

Research internationally increasingly links cultural participation with:

- mental wellbeing;
- community resilience;
- civic engagement;
- reduced social isolation;
- stronger local identity;
- disaster recovery and social adaptation.

National cultural policy should therefore recognise participatory culture as a public good deserving long-term support.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Woodfordia recommends that Australia's National Cultural Policy:

1. Explicitly recognise intangible cultural heritage

The policy should formally acknowledge intangible cultural heritage as a core component of Australia's cultural life, informed by the principles of the UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage.

2. Recognise festivals and gatherings as cultural infrastructure

Community festivals, folk gatherings and participatory cultural events should be recognised as essential cultural infrastructure, not only tourism products.

3. Support community-led cultural transmission

Funding frameworks should support:

- mentoring;
- intergenerational learning;
- volunteer cultural practice;
- community storytelling;
- oral traditions;
- participatory arts;
- local cultural knowledge.

4. Prioritise First Nations cultural continuity

National cultural policy should strengthen support for:

- language revitalisation;
- ceremony;
- community-controlled cultural practice;
- cultural knowledge transmission;
- protection of cultural authority.

5. Establish dedicated climate and sustainability investment within the cultural sector

Establish a dedicated climate and sustainability funding stream within Creative Australia and related cultural funding programs to support long-term decarbonisation, climate adaptation and environmental leadership across the arts and cultural sector.

This investment should support:

- sustainable event infrastructure;
- renewable energy transitions;
- low-emissions touring and transport;
- waste reduction and circular systems;
- climate adaptation planning;
- environmentally responsible cultural production;
- community education and engagement through the arts;
- organisations leading climate-conscious cultural practice.

Cultural organisations are uniquely positioned to help Australians respond creatively, collectively and constructively to the social, environmental and economic challenges of climate change.

Long-term sustainability investment would strengthen both the resilience of the arts sector and its contribution to national climate goals.

6. Expand definitions of cultural value

Assessment frameworks should include:

- participation;
- social cohesion;
- wellbeing;
- cultural continuity;
- environmental connection;
- community resilience.

Economic contribution should remain important, but it should not be the sole measure through which cultural value is understood.

7. Protect and sustain cultural places

Cultural policy should recognise that cultural heritage includes not only buildings and collections, but also the living cultural spaces where communities gather and culture is practised.

CONCLUSION

Australia's cultural identity is carried not only through artworks, institutions and archives, but through living cultural practice.

It lives in songs sung together, stories shared across generations, communal ritual, local knowledge, artistic exchange, volunteer contribution, celebration, gathering and belonging.

The Woodford Folk Festival demonstrates the enduring importance of cultural spaces where culture continues to thrive as living practice through participation, exchange and gathering.

The cultural sector does not sit apart from the environmental and social challenges of our time. Culture is one of the ways communities understand, respond to and endure them together.

A National Cultural Policy that recognises intangible cultural heritage would better reflect the richness of Australian cultural life and strengthen the cultural resilience of future generations.

Woodfordia encourages the Australian Government to adopt a broader understanding of culture, one that values not only what we preserve, but the living cultural practices through which communities gather, create meaning and imagine shared futures together.