

National Cultural Policy (NCP) – The Cultural Continuum

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Australian Government

A new National Cultural Policy is needed to provide a stable, forward-looking framework, ensuring the sector remains resilient, innovative, and inclusive.ⁱ

Cultural conservation

The conservation of cultural material and continuum of practice are central to creative production, confident identity and strong societies. Conservation enables people and their communities to access to their heritage from one generation to the next. Cultural materials and cultural practices that are available, accessible and useable bolster and fortify cultural production, and locate creative endeavour geographically, historically and creatively. In this way, our nation's cultural ideas, practices and identities remain available across Australia's tyranny of distance, and across generations, to inform future iterations of creative practice and community identity. This virtuous circle of knowledge, access, preservation and production helps to keep individuals and communities secure in their identity and able to draw down on diverse sources of knowledge for economic and social benefit.

Access to cultural records, in both tangible and intangible formats is a human right that has been ratified in international conventions, agreements and law.ⁱⁱ A new National Cultural Policy that enables better support for the documentation, maintenance, protection and security of access to cultural heritage and cultural practice will contribute to a stronger democracy and a more significant cultural future for this country and the people in it. This risk is that, without clear, evidence-based, articulated support, Australia's cultural ecosystem will be weakened and the ambition for Australians to draw down on strong culture that is resilient, innovative and inclusive will be diminished.

Resilience

It's not coincidental that cultural heritage is often the first target in war or regime change, and it's not surprising that people give their lives for the right to maintain their cultural heritage. Such significant heroic battles make headlines, draw international attention, and attract international aid funding.

Perhaps we don't see, or we choose to ignore, the way that significant and heroic battles for Australia's cultural heritage are taking place across the country. They are occurring in Indigenous art and culture centres and keeping places; in historical societies, local museums and art galleries in small rural communities; and in diasporic communities where identity is becoming a political battleground. People fight to hold onto their cultural heritage and cultural identity through disadvantage, financial stress, community struggle and political indecisiveness. At times, these small communities and the artists whose voices they hold are the direct target of attack. In the face of increased extreme climatic

events, many find they are on the front line protecting their cultural heritage from cascading catastrophic disaster including fires, floods, and the economic challenges that are of life-changing proportion. Having access to their authentic cultural record enables even the most disadvantaged communities to engage future generations in meaningful education, to mount arguments for their rights, to better understand their past and to more effectively fight for their future. Each year, however, more and more important material is lost.

Culture binds people, their communities, the ideas they have about themselves and about other people, and their ambitions for what the future could be. Support for the mechanisms that strengthen the survival of cultural material is central to both cultural continuity and cultural production. A strong cultural continuum supports vibrant communities and protects knowledge and the production of knowledge. Access to our cultural memory, conserved in all its forms (material and embodied), is essential if artists and associated communities (of belief, practice, location, interest) are able to nurture, support and validate cultural identity through their art production.

In Australia, Indigenous culture remains resilient over millennia, but at each step the battle is usually hard won. Culture should be supported by government not just to be resilient, but to be able to thrive. This requires evidence-based support that is national, and equitable.

Innovation (thriving culture)

The work of Australian artists, writers, performers, producers and allied creative producers exists in an ecosystem of cultural resources. Documentary resources include manuscripts, recordings, archives, productions, critiques, art collections, libraries, oral histories and performances with many going back millennia. This ecosystem supports new iterations of cultural production that enable artists and their communities to engage in cultural production (as opposed to production that is primarily economic or individual). As such, it is critical that these documents remain accessible and available, in good condition, and securely provenanced. The production of cultural knowledge is a part of Australia's cultural continuum, with each new cultural iteration drawing from the past, to create the product upon which the next generation will draw. The transmutation of contemporary lived experience into a cultural record creates new cultural products, and extends the nation's capabilities to innovate. Richard Flanagan's book *Question 7* is a good example of how place, personal histories, heritage, archives and lived experience work together to create rich, new cultural iterations.ⁱⁱⁱ

The economic value of access to heritage has been extensively documented, with social benefits that include a connection with others and sense of identity.^{iv} Benefit is realised through the cycle from the artistic production, to acquisition, to access for research, that in turn feeds into a new production. If this economic benefit is not equally distributed then innovation is less agile, for example when the secondary art market outperforms the primary market and the remuneration for the creative endeavours of contemporary artists, and their suppliers, studios and galleries is reduced in comparison to that of the dealer who is focused on moving product. Innovation requires access to a depth,

diversity and plurality of cultural knowledge that is supported through collections, education and research, artistic practice and production.

Currently, cultural material held beyond the major capital cities is a national resource at risk. There is demonstrable inequity in the geographic distribution of Federal government support across Australia. In just one relatively small example, spatial analysis of the National Community Heritage Grants Scheme demonstrates that most projects funded are located in major cities, with fewer in regional, remote and very remote areas.^v This spatial inequity disadvantages many small communities and particularly disadvantages remote Indigenous communities where innovation is fed by living culture.

Inclusivity (equity)

Inclusivity is a prerequisite for a democracy. As a nation, the cadence of our voice and the surety of our steps are mediated by what we have to say, and how we are able to say it. After significant cultural disruption it can take generations for individuals to build the capacity to operate within unfamiliar cultures, or to rebuild culture. Good governance, equality of education and support for cultural production help engender a strong voice and sure steps; but all require access to authentic cultural records, in good order, that are contained in communities; held as archives, art, and heritage; and made manifest in material and performed formats.^{vi}

Dr Djambawa Marawili, Chair of Arnhem, Northern and Kimberley Artists, Aboriginal Corporation (ANKA) which is the peak body for over 47 Indigenous art centres in these areas in Australia, wrote about risks to Aboriginal cultural material held in remote community art centres.

.. If it is lost, if there is no collection, people will lose the identity in their soul and their blood. Only a few living people are left now who have deep knowledge and responsibility for ceremony and law. This is what we are laying down, that is why we have to keep those patterns and designs alive. To remind people of Yirritja and Dhuwa. To keep culture alive in our blood and our soul, we need to continue looking after and caring for these collections. To have other tools to teach so that art and patterns will be safe, clean and well looked after. This is important; it is the history of Australia.^{vii}

Conservation is critical for strong cultural identities. Despite this, the distribution of access to conservators, conservation skills and conservation knowledge is delivered through a range of geo-political and socio-economic constructions that limit the ability of conservators to provide equity of access. Conservation supports equity and justice with a foundational ambition to ensure inter-generational access. Conservators, therefore, have deep and extensive responsibilities that reach beyond the profession, and beyond the relativity of economics, geography, and culture. Nevertheless, most are employed along the south-eastern seaboard of Australia, in large public collecting institutions. Dr Marawali is similar to many, many other senior First Nation's artists, whose work to conserve and strengthen their culture never stops, but there is little opportunity for any real remuneration for most of the cultural responsibilities that they shoulder.

More generally, if artists cannot interrogate the cultural context in which they are working, then it becomes challenging to secure creativity within a national social, historic and dynamic human discourse. We then risk producing new cultural iterations that are singular, poorly-located, idiosyncratic and solipsistic. This impacts the next generation. This is a risk for many diasporic communities, where access to and preservation of their cultural material remains difficult.

Challenges and Opportunities

The review asks for submissions to identify challenges and opportunities.

There are many challenges for Australian culture but the risk to the cycle of production and preservation is central, and making sure no-one is left out, and that no-one's culture is more at risk than others, is a major challenge. Currently, the plurality and diversity of Australian culture(s) is served by government programs that are segmented, fragmented, sectoral, localised, and uneven. This risks our nation's ability to tell its stories, and reduce the ability to see culture, cultural product, cultural practice and cultural identity as a creative continuum that is linked to economic benefit, innovation and creativity, equity, and inclusivity.

Three opportunities are proposed.

1. First ensure research data is useable, and then use it. Currently it is hard to research the state of the nation's cultural assets. The ABS data sets are unclear, and reports are patchy and led by either policy or project. There is a focus on data that demonstrates the value of state and national collecting institutions. It is almost impossible to understand what the nation's Distributed National Collections might look like. An ongoing, updated assessment remains elusive.
2. Expand the support model from the current focus on centralised resource distribution that favours institutions to a more even model where significance and need are key criteria, particularly for the conservation industry.^{viii}
3. Australia's Indigenous Elders are under intense pressure to perform, conserve, teach and hand on culture. This is globally significant work, of immense value to Australia, but it is unremunerated. Japan's Living National Treasure and in particular 'The Preservers of Important Intangible Cultural Properties' is a model to which the Australia Government could subscribe. In this way, the preservation of Australia culture is an heroic feat, whereas at the moment it is invisible.

The production of a new cultural policy is a major undertaking. This submission focuses on the need for First Nations First; the importance of A Place for Every Story; the needs for Strong Cultural Infrastructure; and Engaging the Audience as part of cultural continuum.

Thank you for the opportunity to present some thoughts on what might be relevant to this consideration.

ⁱ <https://www.arts.gov.au/have-your-say/new-national-cultural-policy>

ⁱⁱ UNESCO. (2010). Brisbane Declaration: Freedom of Information: The Right to Know. <https://archive.crin.org/en/library/legal-database/brisbane-declaration-freedom-information-right-know.html>

UNESCO. (2005). Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions.

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United Nations, General Assembly, Human Rights Council. (2016). 33/20 Cultural rights and the protection of cultural heritage. Resolution A/HRC/RES/33/20.

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United Nations General Assembly. (1946). 59(1). Calling of an International Conference on Freedom of Information : resolution / adopted by the General Assembly. <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/209774?ln=en&v=pdf>

ⁱⁱⁱ Richard Flannagan. 2023. *Question 7*. Random House Australia.

^{iv} See David Throsby 2001. *Economics and Culture*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. See also: David Throsby 2000.

“Economic and Cultural Value in the Work of Creative Artists.” In *Values and Heritage Conservation: Research Report*, edited by E. Avrami, R. Mason, and M. de la Torre, 26–31. Los Angeles: Getty Conservation Institute.

^v See Ainslee Meredith, Robyn Sloggett & Marcelle Scott. (2019) Access relative to need for community conservation funding in Australia, *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, 25:12, 1302-1318, DOI: 10.1080/13527258.2019.1590446

^{vi} Resolution 59 of the United Nations’ General Assembly (1946), and in Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948).

^{vii} Hancock, G., Scott, M., and Davidson, C. (2017). *Safe Keeping: A Report on the Care and Management of Art Centre-based Community Collections*. Arnhem, Northern and Kimberley Artists Aboriginal Corporation.

^{viii} See Ainslee Meredith, Robyn Sloggett & Marcelle Scott. (2019) Access relative to need for community conservation funding in Australia, *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, 25:12, 1302-1318, DOI: 10.1080/13527258.2019.1590446