

# National Cultural Policy Submission



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19 August 2022

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## National Cultural Policy – Submission

Thank you for the opportunity to provide input to the development of a new National Cultural Policy. I provide this submission on behalf of Australia ICOMOS.

ICOMOS – the International Council on Monuments and Sites – is a non-government professional organisation that promotes expertise in the conservation of cultural heritage. ICOMOS is also an official Advisory Body to the World Heritage Committee under the World Heritage Convention. Australia ICOMOS, formed in 1976, is one of over 100 national committees throughout the world. Australia ICOMOS has over 750 members in a range of heritage professions. We have expert members on a large number of ICOMOS International Scientific Committees, as well as on expert committees and boards in Australia.

Our strategic priorities include engaging with contemporary issues in cultural heritage, such as intangible cultural heritage, climate change and resilience. We are committed to the principles of *The Burra Charter: The Australia ICOMOS Charter for Places of Cultural Significance* (2013), which includes the fundamental principle of understanding the heritage values of a place, and we support the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* (UNDRIP) and the principle of free, prior and informed consent. As part of our advocacy for cultural heritage in Australia, we have provided recent submissions on movable cultural heritage, Indigenous cultural heritage, and heritage in other policy areas including planning and climate adaptation.

### Cultural heritage

Heritage is those aspects of the natural and cultural environment that we wish to look after and pass on to future generations (Commonwealth State of the Environment Report 2022). It includes Indigenous cultural heritage sites and knowledge, our natural environment, traditional practices and activities, and the places, landscapes and collections that have meaning for us. Of particular interest in the context of a National Cultural Heritage Policy, is the definition of intangible cultural heritage provided in the UNESCO 2003 *Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage*,

*The “intangible cultural heritage” means 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 recognize as part of their cultural heritage. This intangible cultural heritage, transmitted from generation to generation, is constantly recreated by communities and groups in response to their environment, their interaction with nature and their history, and provides them with a sense of identity and continuity, thus promoting respect for cultural diversity and human creativity. For the purposes of this Convention, consideration will be given solely to such intangible cultural heritage as is compatible with existing international human rights instruments, as well as with the requirements of mutual respect among communities, groups and individuals, and of sustainable development.*

Our intangible cultural heritage (ICH) is just as important as our tangible cultural heritage. Much of that heritage is globally significant (Commonwealth State of the Environment Report 2022). The domains of ICH identified in the Convention and relevant to this discussion encompass oral traditions and expressions, performance, social practices, ritual and festive events, knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe, and traditional craft skills.

These domains provide a handy guide to areas of activity that need to be examined to assess the adequacy of Australia's protection of and support for intangible cultural heritage, and for the identification of gaps in relevant legislation, resourcing, education and administration.

Caring for cultural heritage benefits everyone. Cultural heritage is included within the data on the economic impact of the cultural sector. For example, at the end of 2008, at least 1,184 museums operated from 1,456 locations across Australia including major Commonwealth and State institutions, and a wealth of local and regional museums mainly run by volunteers. In 2013/14 CSIRO estimated that that museum sector employed around 5,000 people, attracted another 23,000 volunteers and generated revenue of \$710m.

The economic benefits from international and cultural heritage visitors who stay longer and spend more than other visitors are equally significant, as are the economic benefits from the creative industries – which include museums, libraries and archives – as well as natural and cultural heritage practitioners and organisations (ABS classification of arts and culture). There is growing evidence for the environmental benefits of retaining the embodied energy in existing buildings and structures, whilst traditional cultural knowledge around burning and environmental management can help us to address the major issues around climate breakdown.

The cultural heritage sector plays a key role in research through initiatives such as Trove and the Atlas of Living Australia, participation in major international initiatives such as the Barcode of Life and digitisation, hosting major research initiatives such as the Australian Museum Research Institute, biological tissue collections, and activity in taxonomy (Council of Australasian Museum Directors National Collaborative Research Infrastructure Strategy response).

### **Creative Australia**

The previous national cultural policy took a welcome, inclusive view of culture that included the arts, cultural heritage and the creative industries. It noted the role of cultural heritage in the creative workforce, the importance of heritage and tradition as a foundation for creativity and culture, the primary importance of Indigenous cultural heritage and the role of place, landscape and Country in shaping identity. It noted that our artists draw on their heritage, mapped support for both cultural institutions and Indigenous and historic sites and organisations through regional and other funding, and tracked the role of volunteers and communities in cultural heritage. There were welcome commitments on tracking the value of the arts and cultural sector and support for regional cultural institutions and national collecting institutions, and a welcome commitment to a three-year work plan across government bringing together different cultural bodies to help address issues such as the Australian Heritage Strategy and a national local government cultural forum.

We note that there is no discrete separation of heritage-related portfolio responsibilities currently, and there is some overlap. It can be expected, however, that in matters relating to cultural heritage and a National Cultural Policy, that there needs to be some discussion, collaboration and guidance to ensure the consistent and equitable delivery of relevant Australian Government services to the community. This could be achieved in the first instance by strong, joint, national coordination of the area which, at present, involves all governments/jurisdictions, many non-government players, and with considerable weaknesses and gaps in the potential coverage. This is a major opportunity for government. It is also an appropriate time to engage in cooperation across all levels of government and NGOs – much of the apparatus of government and the community need to be involved in the identification and maintenance of heritage as its good health is fundamental to our cultural identity and well-being.

Our comments above generally speak to this policy of inclusivity, however we have also provided some more specific comments below addressing the 5 Pillars presented in the documentation calling for submissions.

## 1. First Nations

As the recent State of the Environment Report (2022) notes:

*Although the conceptualisation and management of heritage in Australia are usually divided into discrete categories, there is no heritage in Australia that does not, in some way, connect to Indigenous heritage. Every place in Australia, whether urban or remote, has a Traditional Owner group or groups that have a deep historical, cultural and spiritual belonging to place. Our heritage will be a richer one when we learn new ways of telling all our stories, and the complexity they hold, together.*

Indigenous cultures are the world's oldest living cultures, and all cultural heritage in Australia is connected to Indigenous cultural heritage (Commonwealth State of the Environment Report 2022). Not only are they important to us all, but traditional practices and knowledge can help us to address major challenges such as climate change. First Nations stories told through the arts play a crucial role in presenting counter or repressed historical narratives crucial to local and national truth-telling. The 2016 Reconciliation Australia *State of Reconciliation in Australia Report* details how truth-telling leading to historical acceptance is fundamental to reconciliation.

The key challenges and opportunities for cultural heritage include:

- Our failure to have effective protection for Indigenous cultural heritage evidenced by the recent loss of the 46,000 year-old Juukan Gorge rockshelters, but also other threats to our cultural heritage (Commonwealth State of the Environment Report 2022).
- The need for effective and empowered Indigenous representation and involvement in decision making around cultural heritage, not only for heritage protection but how heritage is affected by wider economic, environmental and social initiatives in line with the principles of free, prior and informed consent, and the recognition of First Nations Intellectual Property.
- Co-existence of systems of land ownership.

## 2. A place for every story

This is important because as with the arts, it is vital that government support for cultural heritage reflects the diversity of Australia, and that all citizens wherever they live and whatever their background or circumstances, have a right to shape our cultural identity and its expression including our cultural heritage. The community must be placed at the core of this process of ensuring our culture and heritage is protected and maintained into the future – both of our First Nation peoples and peoples associated with subsequent migrations. In addition, a diversity of themes is essential, and we note the need to include industrial heritage, maritime heritage and moveable heritage as components that have been long neglected.

The key challenges and opportunities include:

- Working towards more diverse and representative registers of cultural heritage.
- Support for community groups to gather and share their own stories.

## 3. Centrality of the artist

It is easy to assume that this pillar is irrelevant to cultural heritage. But as Creative Australia notes, culture is not created by government but enabled by it. Both tangible and intangible cultural heritage is primarily kept alive by traditional knowledge holders, crafts people and communities, such as Indigenous language speakers, artists, custodians of knowledge and material, or cultural heritage practitioners.

The challenges and opportunities are:

- Programmes to support artists should be open to cultural heritage knowledge holders, such as speakers of traditional languages, holders of cultural knowledge and crafts people.
- The arts curriculum should embrace culture in its widest sense.

## 4. Strong institutions

Strong cultural heritage institutions are important, as they enable people and communities to understand, care for and protect their own cultural heritage. The grounding of these institutions in broader instruments of protection is essential. A particular interest to Australia ICOMOS has been, and continues to be, to encourage the Australian Government to move towards signing the UNESCO 2003 *Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage*. As at 27 July 2020 there were 180 signatory countries. Signing the convention will lead to the more comprehensive adoption of international best practice standards

for safeguarding and management of ICH at all levels of government, and other societal benefits, for instance:

- improved community engagement with their heritage;
- strengthened community cultural identity and confidence; and
- an opportunity for formal recognition of community ownership of certain cultural practices and the associated intellectual property with related economic potential and improvement in material welfare.

There are primarily two Australian Government Departments that have a responsibility for Australian intangible heritage in its widest definition. These are the Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development, Communications and the Arts (DITRDCA) and the Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water (DCCEEW). DITRDCA, for instance, is responsible for movable cultural heritage, museums, arts, folkloric and trade/craft matters. The statutory responsibilities of DCCEEW encompass the *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999* and a role in maintaining its heritage lists and various other programs.

Australia already has many government and non-government organisations (at all levels) working in the cultural heritage space with a number of these carrying-out work in the non-place-based area, many supported by government, particularly via the Arts area. Should Australia ratify the convention, Australian governments will be able to better support these entities, creating a more coordinated and comprehensive alignment consistent with the intent of the convention, and tailoring this structure to the Australian situation, complementing the existing, place-based heritage system to safeguard Australian living intangible cultural heritage.

The challenges and opportunities are:

- The new policy should be explicit that strong cultural institutions include strong cultural heritage institutions: not only our museums, galleries, libraries and archives, but cultural heritage agencies in the Commonwealth and State Governments, and local councils, as well as a strong voluntary sector.
- The new policy is an opportunity to address resourcing for cultural heritage which lags behind natural heritage and the arts. In 2014 expenditure on the arts was around three times the total expenditure on 'environmental heritage' (according to the ABS) within which expenditure on natural heritage considerably outweighed cultural heritage (Commonwealth State of the Environment Report 2016).
- The opportunity for the Australian Government to ratify the UNESCO *2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage*, and in so doing provide a further opportunity for recognition of the significance of Australia's heritage.

## 5. Reaching the audience

This is important because as Creative Australia noted, cultural heritage is often the foundation for creativity. There is increasing convergence between arts, culture and heritage, as museums become places for creative engagement, and as place-makers seek to activate public parks and spaces after lock down through creative activities. Ground breaking exhibitions such as the *Songlines: tracking the Seven Sisters*, much of which was created on Country, are breaking down the division between art, culture, landscape, place and meaning to find new ways of thinking.

Challenges and opportunities include:

- Support for cultural heritage organisations to reach audiences.
- Lack of good consistent data on cultural heritage institutions and audiences that enable us to understand target groups. This was a commitment made in the last policy and is a matter of concern expressed in both the 2016 and 2022 Commonwealth State of the Environment Reports.



In conclusion, we strongly recommend that a key plank of the new Cultural Policy is the ultimate objective of Australia ratifying the UNESCO ICH Convention. While it would be preferred that Australia signed the convention, now or in the future, it is recommended that Australia improves its performance across both Indigenous and non-Indigenous intangible cultural heritage.

We further recommend that there be a strong, joint, national coordination of those areas encompassed under 'culture' and that attention be given to the considerable weaknesses and gaps in current coverage.

We look forward to the new policy taking an inclusive approach, which threads cultural heritage throughout the policy rather than seeing it as a separate or additional issue, and embeds cultural heritage within the funding and actions as well as the goals.

Australia ICOMOS would welcome an opportunity to further contribute to the formulation of this significant policy. Thank you again for your consideration of the views of Australia ICOMOS on this important issue.

Yours sincerely



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President**