

A New National Cultural Policy

Submission to the Department of Infrastructure, Transport,
Regional Development, Communications and the Arts

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Introduction

The Northern Territory Government's Department of Territory Families, Housing and Communities is pleased to make a submission on the new national cultural policy. This comes at a time when the Northern Territory is undertaking a major investment in capital assets and other strategic initiatives inspired and enhanced by the Territory's unique social and natural assets. By working in partnership with the Federal Government and leveraging private investment, we believe the Northern Territory is poised to maximise its position as the artistic, cultural and spiritual heart of the country.

General comments

Regional Australia is home to some of the country's most defining national stories. In the Northern Territory, from Arnhem Land and the Tiwi Islands to Central Australia, small communities form an incredible, unparalleled network of makers, knowledge holders and storytellers. This place can not only lead reconciliation and transform cultural tourism but, from its unique geographic location, strengthen linkages within the Asia-Pacific region and broker new cultural exchanges. To realise this, we need a national cultural policy that acknowledges the Northern Territory as the cultural and artistic heart of the nation.

Pillar 1: First Nations first

Investing in First Nations artistic practice

Arts and culture can be powerful catalysts for national discussions that are critical to Australia's future, and the Northern Territory has an unprecedented opportunity to position First Nations creativity, culture and truth-telling at the centre of what we do. We are achieving this through investment in significant infrastructure, including the National Aboriginal Art Gallery in Alice Springs, the State Square Art Gallery in Darwin, the Northern Territory Arts Trail, and a broad range of arts grant programs that facilitate safe, widespread and diverse participation in, and equitable access to, arts and cultural heritage in the Territory. A national cultural policy that acknowledges and values the Territory's distinct contribution to the national dialogue is needed to realise the full potential of this investment.

To bring stories to life, First Nations people must be empowered to share their knowledge and creativity their way. To achieve this, we recommend the following:

- First Nations principles of leadership and governance to be integrated into policy-making processes across government.
- Arts policy and funding guidelines that recognise First Nations arts practice as holistic, cross-disciplinary and interconnected and not easily siloed into mainstream art forms.
- Support for programs and initiatives that empower youth arts organisations and other enablers of intergenerational sharing of language, knowledge and stories.
- Priority investment in education, training, mentorship and skills development programs to strengthen and expand First Nations employment and representation in middle-tier jobs, leadership roles, boards and advisory groups, particularly in industries that are based on the creativity, knowledge and histories of Aboriginal people.
- The creation of connected career pathways and qualifications, enabled by a national network of organisations and supported, in turn, by the Australian Government and private business.
- Regional employment and workforce development strategies that prioritise the creation of jobs that fit people and communities, not the other way around.
- Training and employment strategies that address gaps in literacy and numeracy, poverty and the matrix of social problems, including health, housing, trauma, transport, and violence that impact an

individual's ability to participate. Wrap-around-support services are needed to ensure intensive support for new entrants into the workforce.

- Legislative reforms to protect First Nations cultural intellectual property, including traditional knowledge and cultural expressions, and to reduce the impact of inauthentic art and craft.

Bringing ancestors and culture home

In close collaboration and in accordance with the wishes of traditional owners, the Northern Territory Government, Northern Territory land councils, and the Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory work with national and international institutions to facilitate the repatriation to Territory communities of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ancestral remains and secret/sacred objects. This work is not only a vehicle for healing and justice, but promotes broader respect and understanding of First Nations culture and provides positive role models for younger Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander generations.

This work includes the repatriation to central Australian communities of secret/sacred ceremonial material from the Strehlow Research Centre Collection, an exceptional record of cultural and ceremonial traditions, ecological knowledge, family relationships and socio-historical events. There is no comparable achievement in documenting Indigenous cultural heritage in Australia and few examples of equal significance exist internationally. The collection is considered a priceless resource by Aboriginal communities and contributes to the ongoing maintenance of language and cultural traditions.

In the near future, over 5,000 sets of ancestral remains and secret/sacred objects are likely to be repatriated to the Territory from other Australian jurisdictions, and additional material from overseas institutions will vastly increase this number. This work is critically urgent, as the few remaining senior custodians who are able to interpret and facilitate a knowledge exchange about material being repatriated are ageing. The Territory faces significant logistical and resourcing challenges not only during the repatriation process itself but afterwards, in providing, at the request of Traditional Owners, indefinite storage for (and access to) the repatriated material in Territory institutions.

Greater investment and a national cultural policy that supports this nationally significant work through closer collaboration with national institutions around Australia will contribute to preserving and maintaining Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures in a living context in the Territory, help to strengthen Aboriginal identity and well-being, and link Aboriginal people to their community and country, thereby delivering significant social and cultural outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

Pillar 2: A place for every story

A unique history, art and culture is the inheritance of every Australian and can foster a deeper understanding of our shared histories. Australian stories that celebrate our storytellers and the woven multicultural fabric of the Territory must be told in schools and in communities, in Australian languages, by young and old, through film, television, theatre, music, and literature. No Australian should be left out of the opportunity to experience, share, and create our national stories solely because of where they live.

These stories, knowledge, skills, expressions and many other cultural practices constitute the intangible cultural heritage defining our nation's cultural diversity. Unfortunately, Australia has not yet signed the *United Nations Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (2003)*, a key instrument for safeguarding important intangible cultural heritage, including cultural practices under threat such as the many Indigenous languages, songlines, ceremonies, Dreaming stories, and environmental knowledge of Northern Territory Aboriginal cultures.

To promote improved creation, sharing and preservation of cultural practices, we recommend the national cultural policy supports the following:

- Creative industries funding allocated via formulas based on metrics other than population, as these serve to disadvantage jurisdictions with low population but with a high density of arts and cultural workers relative to their population.
- A dedicated funding stream for organisations with young people’s engagement in the arts as a primary mission.
- Increased investment in regional and remote artists and art centres, art galleries, museums, libraries and keeping places.
- The signing by the Australian Government of the *United Nations Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (2003)*.
- The decolonisation of cultural collections through adoption of best practice in their care, interpretation and sharing to keep pace with changes in society, including adoption of the principles contained in *First Peoples: A Roadmap for Enhancing Indigenous Engagement in Museum and Galleries* (Janke, T. 2018).
- More effective sharing of national stories and national collections, not only in regional places, but across the country, both physically and digitally.
- Meaningful progress towards improving levels of telecommunications access and affordability across remote and regional Australia.
- A national Arts Week to provide an opportunity to highlight, celebrate, participate in and experience arts and culture in every form, by as many Australians as possible across the country.

Pillar 3: The centrality of the artist

The Northern Territory—and specifically Central Australia—is the world’s most significant living art gallery. First Nations arts provides significant economic, social and cultural benefits to the Territory and beyond; the visual arts and crafts sector alone reached about \$250 million in 2019–20.¹ Across Australia, First Nations art generates income for artists and art workers, creates economic opportunities for communities, and helps maintain, strengthen and share Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures.

The Northern Territory is uniquely positioned by virtue of its unique geographical location and existing relationships to forge new cultural and artistic partnerships and exchanges with our nearest neighbours in Indonesia and Southeast Asia. Tourism programs play a role, as does international diplomacy based on cultural exchange, facilitating the mobility of artists around the world. Such “soft diplomacy” can be powerful and a significant driver of tourism.

To support artists as workers and to celebrate their role as the creators of cultural expression, we recommend the following:

- The identification of cultural industries roles and job types across industry and government.
- Reforms in industrial awards, superannuation legislation and First Nations-led education and employment in the arts to allow artists to earn at least the minimum wage.
- Investment in peak bodies, support agencies and service organisations to increase professional development programs for artists and arts workers.
- Artistic expression cannot be divorced from other aspects of culture, especially language. A national cultural policy should embrace the preservation of First Nations languages.

¹ Productivity Commission 2022, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Visual Arts and Crafts, Draft Report, Canberra, July 2022

- Investment in peak bodies, support agencies and service organisations to increase professional development programs for artists and arts workers, particularly in regional and remote Australia, as well as industry mentoring and internship programs.
- Improved methods of enumerating regional and remote artists and cultural workers in national statistical surveys and estimating their overall economic contribution.

Pillar 4: Strong institutions

Museums and galleries across Australia are how communities remember themselves and are forums for conversations we may otherwise not easily have. COVID-19 has reminded us of the importance of connecting to, and sharing, these memories and experiences as part of the recovery process. To strengthen the spectrum of institutions that sustain our arts and culture, we recommend that the national cultural policy promotes the following:

- Targeted support for small museums to carry out their work effectively, supported by state and national institutions wherever possible.
- Australia-wide implementation of *First Peoples: A Roadmap for Enhancing Indigenous Engagement in Museum and Galleries* (Janke, T. 2018) not only to advance the participation and representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in museums and galleries, but to facilitate their recognition as owners of the knowledge contained in Aboriginal cultural collections.
- Increased opportunities for Australian institutions to work collaboratively to strengthen specialisation and complementarity and to enable centres of excellence to emerge across the national cultural and artistic landscape. Collaborative national, state and territory collection development strategies would aid to ensure that duplication is reduced, and complementarity is enhanced.

The broad spectrum of institutions that sustain our arts and culture includes, in addition to the collecting agencies, the funding bodies, Festivals Australia and the touring programs. A focus on accessibility and diversity can help maintain responsiveness to evolving industry needs. For example, expanding the scope of multi-year funding programs to include smaller organisations would encourage wider participation and stimulate innovation.

Pillar 5: Reaching the audience

Audiences expect to access arts and culture onsite, offsite, and digitally. Arts and culture providers responded to COVID-19 with exceptional creativity and innovation, yet barriers to access are growing rather than diminishing. Arts and cultural initiatives in the Northern Territory are set to have a transformative impact on educational and cultural tourism; however, these initiatives will not meet their full potential if existing barriers (e.g. continued elimination of flights in and out of Darwin and Alice Springs) stand. Similarly, the geographic extent of Territory communities means that digital access to, and participation in, arts and cultural experiences and collections is vital, yet the Territory has the most significant digital divide in Australia.

We also need to better understand our audiences and their needs to provide more meaningful, audience driven, and collaborative engagement. Support for audience segmentation and audience development, co-creation initiatives, and design thinking approaches will help to ensure that we create more relevant experiences.

To build and expand audiences at home and abroad, we recommend that the national cultural policy support the following:

- Strategies to regain audiences lost because of COVID and to expand markets for Australian artists.
- Government procurement policies, content requirements and other mechanisms that stimulate demand for local creative product.

- Artist exchange opportunities and export support to showcase Australian artists, companies and their works to the widest possible audience.
- Investment in online presentation and performance, and associated improvements in copyright and content protection, to both expand our global reach and to allow remote artists to engage in the creative economy.
- Investment in digital equity and consistent high-speed internet access across Australia.
- Opportunities for international touring and regional exhibitions and performances, and the digitisation of museum collections to facilitate their online delivery.
- Democratisation of skills through expanded training, education and entrepreneurial pathways, particularly by ensuring equitable access to skills development in remote areas.
- Provision of opportunities for artists to develop the skills needed to successfully manage a business enterprise.